LIMINALITY AS IDENTITY IN FOUR NOVELS BY BEN OKRI AND TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

Laurel Taylor

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of St Andrews

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LIMINALITY AS IDENTITY IN FOUR NOVELS BY BEN OKRI AND TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

LAUREL TAYLOR
UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS
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ABSTRACT

This thesis compares two novels each by Nigerian writer Ben Okri and Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun. By examining apparently transformative moments in the lives of each protagonist, Azaro and Zahra, its principal aim is to show how liminality characterises their identities, and is a source of personal and potentially political liberation, mirrored in the narrative techniques.

The Introduction demonstrates the centrality of identity to these novels and the domain of postcolonial studies and defines the key concepts in relevant literary, theoretical and political contexts: identity, hybridity, liminality, magical realism and the postcolonial/postmodern debate.

Chapter I establishes Azaro and Zahra as liminal beings from birth, whose childhood rituals are incomplete and who continually subvert parental and social expectation. This examination of liminality may be extended by reading the characters as emblems of their respective nations-in-waiting.

Chapter II focuses on the tension between biology and culture within Zahra’s gendered identity and demonstrates empowerment in her choice to remain liminal in a ‘potential space’. Azaro’s shifting sexual awareness is examined as a manifestation of his liminality. The allegorical reading of Zahra’s life is continued, and a connection made between sexual and political corruption in the English texts.

Chapter III centres on the fluidity of Azaro’s boundaries and perception. Like Zahra’s, his liminality is chosen, as he decides to live in a potential space between human and spirit. Zahra, too, has a special relationship with the spirit world; she and Azaro are shown to have revelatory visions of political significance.

The Conclusion brings together the analysis of Azaro’s and Zahra’s identities before extending the liminal states of the protagonists to those of reader and artist. It concludes that these texts offer new opportunities for the understanding of postcolonial texts and moving beyond the duality of the postcolonial/postmodern debate.
DECLARATIONS

(i) I, Laurel Taylor, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 81,500 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date: 23 February 2001

(ii) I was admitted as a research student in September 1996, as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in September 1997; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1996 and 2001.

Date: 23 February 2001

(iii) I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

Date: 21 February 2001

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a comparative study of four novels by Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun and Nigerian Ben Okri. The juxtaposition of Ben Jelloun’s *L’Enfant de sable* (ES) and *La Nuit sacrée* (NS) and Okri’s *The Famished Road* (FR) and *Songs of Enchantment* (SE) is particularly rich because the four novels are loosely set at the liminal moment between colonial influence and full political independence for Morocco and Nigeria respectively, the countries in which the texts are set; Morocco was a French protectorate from 1912 to 1956; Nigeria was a British colony from 1914 to 1960, though a European presence had been felt in each region long before and has remained significant since. Thus, at a similar moment in time, politically and historically, the actions and reactions of two different fictional communities can be observed through examination of the life of a protagonist at or near whose birth the first text begins. Because of the quasi-allegorical nature of the lives of the respective protagonists, Azaro and Zahra, in which they are linked to their respective countries, questions of identity are paramount, as the young protagonist and the nation-in-waiting attempt in each case to construct an identity that challenges known and accepted tradition.

The question of identity and identification may also be related to the texts’ place within the European canon. One book in each pair has won a major European literary prize (the Prix Goncourt for NS and the Booker Prize for FR). These prizes, the means of bringing the authors greater recognition in Europe and abroad, raise interesting questions about the place of ‘postcolonial’ literature within the European literary canon, as will be seen in this Introduction. First, a closer look at the background of the authors and the plots of the four novels to be scrutinised in this thesis will provide the appropriate context for further development of the areas of comparison to be undertaken.

I. BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Born in 1944, in Fez, Morocco, Tahar Ben Jelloun was thirteen at the time of Morocco’s independence. He spent much of his early life in Tangiers, about which he has written in several books (e.g. *Jour de silence à Tanger* and *La Nuit de l’erreur*). He did his first degree at the University of Rabat before teaching in Tetouan and Casablanca. Poetry was Ben Jelloun’s first literary interest; he wrote his first poem in 1965 (Déjeux 1984: 224). Before leaving Morocco, Ben Jelloun was involved in a literary review called *Souffles*, which Lucy Stone McNeece describes as having ‘a strong political and ideological orientation that radically altered the development of Moroccan literature’ (1995: 33). Those working on *Souffles* showed their concern with political and literary matters, recognising the ‘language problem’ of writing in the

References to the four primary texts that are the focus of the thesis will use the abbreviations provided in brackets; all other references will follow the author-date system. In both cases, immediately subsequent references to the same text will use page numbers only.
language of the coloniser, French, by making Souffles bilingual (French-Arabic) in 1968. Ben Jelloun was interned in a disciplinary camp in Morocco when he was eighteen and says that it had a profound effect on him, not least because during this period he was introduced to the literature of Joyce and other experimental writers (Argand 1999: 32).

Ben Jelloun moved to Paris in 1971 to study social psychiatry; in the same period, Souffles was banned in Morocco. His first publications were two volumes of poetry, Hommes sous le linceul de silence published in Morocco in 1971 and Cicatrices du soleil published in Paris in 1972. His first novel, Harrada, was published in 1973. Among the texts which followed are the poetry collections Les Amandiers sont morts de leurs blessures (1976) and A l'insu du souvenir (1980); and the novels La Réclusion solitaire (1976), Moba le fou, Moba le sage (1978), and La Prière de l'absent (1981). Early texts deal with the plight of Maghrebi immigrants to France such as La Plus Haute des solitudes: Mère affective et sexuelle d'entigres nord-africains (1977), based on his social psychiatry thesis, and Hospitalité française: racisme et immigration maghrébines (1985). During this period, he also wrote articles and reviews for papers such as Le Monde. From this initial interest, Ben Jelloun’s work then turned to exploration of the role of women in Moroccan Muslim society; the most notable of these works are the two upon which this thesis will be based, ES and NS.

Ben Jelloun was 'le premier écrivain arabo-africain couronné par le prix littéraire prestigieux [the Goncourt]' (Nicolini 1987: 22). The efficacy of the prize in introducing his work to a wider audience is clear. Though he had been a significant figure in Maghrebi literature for some time, most of the critical attention he has received has come since the publication of ES and NS, and it is from this time that he has remained at the forefront of Maghrebi literature in French. Among the novels subsequently published are Jour de silence à Tanger (1990), the meditation of an ill old man; Les Yeux baissés (1991), which studies the experiences of a young Moroccan girl upon immigration to France; La Soudure fraternelle, a non-fiction work about friendship and L'Homme rompu about the corruption of a formerly irreproachable fonctionnaire both in 1994; La Nuit de l'orée (1997), again on the subject of male-female relations in a Moroccan community and, most recently, L'Auberge des pauvres (1999). Ben Jelloun has continued to write for journals and newspapers, demonstrating his concern for world problems: Le Racisme expliqué à ma fille (1998) treats the subject of racism with sensitivity and candour, whilst L'Ange Avengé (1995) and L'Auberge des pauvres (1999) discuss the situation in Italy. In these recent texts, he has not completely distanced himself from his origins, as the narrator of L'Auberge des pauvres is Moroccan. Rather, both the socio-political situation in Morocco and that in Italy are illuminated through this combination.

Ben Okri was born in 1959 in Minna, Nigeria, just one year before the full political independence of that country. He spent the period from 1961 to 1968 in England before returning to Nigeria to be educated in Ibadan and Warri. Okri is reluctant to give details about his childhood because, he says, 'I'd rather reserve that for the complex manipulations of
memory that only fiction can provide', though he does state that his father studied law in
London and ‘returned with a library of Western classics from Dickens to Mark Twain, the
Greeks, the Romans, Austen, English essays’ (Wilkinson 1991: 77). These texts were some of
Okri’s formative reading experiences. His first article was published when he was seventeen,
leading to publications of his stories in ‘Nigerian women’s journals and in the evening papers’
(79). After failing to get a university place in Nigeria, Okri came to England in 1978 to study at
the University of Essex. Like Ben Jelloun, Okri did not train to be a writer. He was aiming to be
‘a scientist, a doctor or an engineer’ (Wilkinson 1991: 78). Okri’s first novel, Flowers and Shadows
(1980), grew out of the stories he had written in Nigeria. Next came another novel, The
Landscapes Within (1981), followed by two short story collections: Incidents at the Shrine (1986) and
Stars of the New Curfew (1988). These early texts have been compared by critics such as Charles
E. Nnolim and Ayo Mamudo to European Modernist writing, in particular, similarities between
Okri’s The Landscapes Within and James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) have
been noted. However, this early ‘imitation’ of Modernist techniques was abandoned when Okri
decided that he had ‘made too deep a journey into modernism [sic], after I had begun to feel
that my ambition was better than my craft’ (Read 1998: 2). Okri received a bursary from the
Arts Council in 1984, and in 1987 won both the Paris Review Aga Khan Prize for Fiction and
the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Africa. However, his big break into ‘English literature’
came with The Famished Road, which won the Booker Prize in 1991. More books followed: The
Famished Road’s sequel, Songs of Enchantment in 1993; a volume of poetry, An African Elegy (1992);
Astonishing the Gods (1995), a meditation on boundaries and the transformation of
consciousness; Dangerous Love (1996), a re-working of The Landscapes Within; and two collections
of essays, Birds of Heaven in 1995, and A Way of Being Free in 1997. In addition to the novel,
Infinite Riches (1998), the third volume in what is now called the Famished Road cycle, his most
recent text is his long poem Mental Fight (1999), which reflects on the new millennium. Like Ben
Jelloun, he contributes to newspapers. He also speaks at literary festivals and will be a guest in
the 2001 series of BBC Radio 4’s Any Questions, a topical programme in which panellists are
asked questions about current affairs by members of the public.

Among all the texts written by these authors, the four chosen for detailed study have
been selected because they offer very fruitful material for analysis when brought into interaction
with one another. One reason for this is that these novels are the only ‘set’ of sequels in the
authors’ ouvre, with the sequel published after a two year gap. The existence of a sequel invites
questions about the nature of storytelling and the possibility of ever telling a story fully or
correctly; indeed, closure, or lack thereof, is one of the primary concerns of Okri’s and Ben

\footnote{Infinite Riches, published two years after my research was begun in 1996, will not be a focus in this thesis, partly
because it does not add substantially to the discussion undertaken in it and partly in the interests of a more balanced
comparison with the two French novels. It will be referred to where necessary to illuminate the arguments put
forward, namely in the overall Conclusion.}
Jelloun’s novels, as this thesis will show. Another important reason for the comparison of these four texts and these two authors is the significant insight that may be gained into current debates in postcolonial studies through comparison of authors from completely different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, who nevertheless both share a belief that art can change the world, whether or not this art seems explicitly to tackle and resolve ‘worldly’ political and social problems. To compare authors who are themselves interested in the transgression or transcendence of boundaries, in turn blurs the boundaries between them, and shifts the focus to the underlying similarities of their work. Further details about the texts will amplify this initial declaration of the reasons behind this particular comparison.

II. TEXT SYNOPSES

Tahar Ben Jelloun’s _L’Enfant de sable_ (ES) published in 1985, is an erratic account of the life of Ahmed/Zahra, child of a wealthy Arab family in Morocco. After an uninterrupted series of seven daughters, father Hadj Ahmed decides to manipulate destiny because his social and financial status is dramatically undermined by the lack of a son. Consequently, though his eighth child is indeed biologically a girl, she is raised as a boy. She is named Ahmed, ‘circumcised’, and sent to the Koranic school. The success of the deception is apparent in Zahra’s own reaction to it: when she is old enough to understand her biological femininity, she is at first so far entrenched in the privileges of masculinity that she continues to present herself as a man, going to the extremes of growing a beard and ‘taking’ a wife, her epileptic cousin Fatima. With her father’s death, however, Zahra begins to question her male identity. Her story is told via several storytellers, each claiming some sort of ‘authority’ in the tale: two of the most important storytellers who appear near the end are the ‘troubadour aveugle’ (blind troubadour) and _l’homme au turban bleu_ (man in the blue turban). Critics have connected the former to the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, both because the author and character become sightless in later life and because the blind troubadour uses quotations from Borges’ short stories (see Fayad 1993). This blind troubadour claims to have been visited in Buenos Aires by a woman with a similar background to Zahra’s. The man in the blue turban, by contrast, seems to derive his authority from journals given to him by a woman who claims to be Zahra’s niece. What ‘really’ happens to Zahra is ambiguous in the text because of the competing storytellers: the reader is left to choose between stories of Zahra’s death or of her abandonment of the male role in favour of a quest for a new identity. The power of choice given to the reader acts as an invitation to her to engage in a similar quest of her own.

Despite the suggestion of Zahra’s death in _ES_, the 1987 _La Nuit sacrée_ (NS) picks up her tale. This time, the narrative is recounted in Zahra’s own words, with no storytellers
competing for ownership of the story. In NS, Zahra renounces her inheritance from her father's death and takes to the road. After a brief stay in a strange world of eternal children, she stumbles into the lives of the Assise of a hammam and her blind brother, the Consul. In return for room and board, Zahra acts as housekeeper and companion to the Consul, with whom she has a mysterious affinity. They eventually become lovers, but their happiness is short-lived because Zahra is sent to prison for murdering the uncle who was cheated out of his inheritance by the birth of 'Ahmed'. The murder does not turn the reader against Zahra, however, as the uncle is portrayed as a greedy, evil man whose death does more to help than harm the community. While in prison, Zahra comes to significant conclusions about her identity, which for most of her life she has perceived as being disturbingly unstable. At the end of the novel, she is reunited with the Consul in a dream-like scene in which he has become a saint. Though NS is a sequel to ES, the action in them does not happen in strict sequence: there are overlaps, contradictions and ambiguities both within and between the texts that further highlight the issues of authority raised in ES.

Ben Okri's The Famished Road (1991) and Songs of Enchantment (1993) do not explicitly present the kind of tortured struggle for identity openly explored by Ben Jelloun in ES and NS. In fact, the main character, Azaro, seems quite comfortable with his identity throughout most of the two texts. It is rather the attempts by other characters and, indeed, the reader, to understand his identity that bring the subject into focus. FR is a novel full of both intense joy and harsh physical realities. This is largely because of Azaro's status as an abiku or spirit-child. According to Yoruba tradition, abiku children choose not to 'stay' in the human world, preferring to return to the ethereal pleasures of the spirit world. No matter how many times they are born to the same mother, they find ways of dying. This traditional belief may arise from a need to account for the high infant mortality rate in western Nigeria. They are considered by the Yoruba to be 'born to die' (quoted by Drewal 1992: 59). Before birth, Azaro makes a pact with his spirit companions that he will die in order to rejoin them in the spirit world at the first opportunity. However, once in the human world, he decides to stay and face the consequences of breaking his pact. Azaro gives several possible reasons for his decision, but suggests that the most important reason is the 'bruised face' of his mother (5), who has already lost several children. Azaro's relationship with each of his parents is significant and each is a major figure in the novel. His mother embodies generally passive suffering, whereas his father is violent and thwarted. 'Dad' trains as a boxer, fighting three monumental battles from which, despite his victories, it takes him days to recover. Dad becomes obsessed with bettering his life, his village and the entire continent of Africa, though the ways he goes about it are often

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3I will refer to her as Zahra, the name she is given by circus performers in ES and by her father in NS, and use the female pronoun, except in cases where the name Ahmed is necessary to show her male role, and in quotations that use the male name and pronoun.

4The Igbo group of central and eastern Nigeria have a similar phenomenon, ogbenja children.
misguided or naive. Though poverty beleaguered the family, they eke out a meagre existence. Other pivotal figures in the novel are the ambiguous Madame Koto, who asks Azaro to sit in her bar for good luck; Azaro’s greatest enemy, the blind old man; and Ade, Azaro’s abiku friend who, unlike Azaro, is not willing to remain in the human world. FR closes after Dad’s recovery from his third fight. Azaro wakes alone at dawn, realising that the good wind that had calmed his fears the night before has not lasted and that ‘Sometimes a dream can be the highest point of a life’ (500).

In *Songs of Enchantment*, Azaro picks up the narrative directly where he left off in *FR*, repeating exact phrases and adopting a conversational tone in the first chapters. For example, Azaro says, ‘Yes, the spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead’ (4), echoing Azaro’s words in *FR*, ‘The spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead’ (487). In contrast to the lack of straightforward continuity or contiguity between Ben Jelloun’s novels, *SE* is a direct continuation of the events in *FR* such as Dad’s wild plans for reform, Madame Koto’s growing power, Ade’s unwillingness to stay in the human world, and ever-increasing political unrest. In *SE*, Azaro’s mother leaves, his father goes blind and the ghetto-dwellers are plagued with problems. *SE* focuses on communal rather than individual suffering, and how it may be endured through ‘re-dreaming our lives’ (3). The style of *SE* is more metaphorical than that of its predecessor, more clearly proposing a national or African identity that will allow individuals to ‘see the sunlight beyond the chaos’ (297).

The four texts, particularly *ES* and *FR*, represent some of these writers’ most experimental work in terms of form and a non-realist approach to reality. The first books in each pairing (*ES* and *FR*) are more challenging and ambiguous than their sequels, however, and most critical attention has focused on *ES* and *FR*, Ben Jelloun’s award for *NS* notwithstanding. In none of the four novels is the plot constructed based on a conventional sense of time or linearity. Any thread of cause and effect risks being lost due to long passages either of minute and seemingly repetitive description in the case of *FR* and *SE*, warring narrators in *ES*, or dream-like sequences in *NS*. No matter how meticulous the reader, an exact diagram of dates or even events in the texts is difficult to compile. Though the texts are set at a very significant historical period, they do not focus on this; rather, a sense of timelessness is conveyed through the emphasis on descriptions of Azaro’s and Zahra’s internal states and personal experiences. The texts defy easy interpretation and encourage the reader to engage with them on multiple levels, particularly with regard to questions of identity, to which this Introduction now turns.
III. IDENTITY, LIMINALITY AND RITUAL

Because the texts focus on Azaro’s and Zahra’s individual development, they may be, with some reservations, placed in the genre of the Bildungsroman or the roman d’éducation. Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa defines the traditional Western Bildungsroman as a ‘novel of education’ that depicts the process by which a young person attains adulthood on the terms laid down by his or her society. In the conventional Bildungsroman, Bildung is the process by which the world plays the role of moulder, marking and maturing the protagonist to the point where he can finally make a personal choice out of what is available to him, adopting an individual attitude towards life. (1996: 1)

The presentation of Zahra’s and Azaro’s growth fits these criteria in many ways. Their development is shown to proceed from birth through a series of stages of apparent personal transformation. Both experience social expectation, primarily from their parents, and both adopt an ‘individual attitude toward life’. However, neither the characters’ lives nor the narrative/textual presentation of them are conventional in Western terms. Therefore, though the texts refer to the genre, they also interrogate it by refusing to adhere to it in terms of its usual linearity. In order to illuminate this interrogation, Azaro’s and Zahra’s development will be analysed in relation to the concept of liminality.

The academic use of liminality as a theoretical framework began in the domain of social anthropology with Arthur van Gennep in the early twentieth century and continued with Victor Turner in the 1960s and 1970s. Van Gennep, an ethnography lecturer at the University of Neuchâtel, France, used the basic image of threshold-crossing, which he observed as being widespread in many cultures, as the foundation for a theory of rites of passage. Though it is important to remember that van Gennep was writing at the height of Empire, with his findings inevitably shaped by the ideological climate of his day, I do not believe that this alone is enough to invalidate his work for use today. The fact that The Rites of Passage is still in print and is cited by scholars from a variety of subject areas lends support to this assertion. In addition, it is the ways that his work has been co-opted and reconfigured in the late twentieth century that are of most interest to this thesis. His text, The Rites of Passage, inspired Victor Turner, an anthropologist from the University of Chicago, to theorise a more comprehensive structure of liminality. Largely because of their work, liminality as an analytical tool has found its way into anthropology, what is now called cultural studies, literary studies and a range of other academic disciplines.

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5 Though it is usual to use a lowercase ‘v’ at the beginning of ‘van Gennep’, in order not to distract the reader, when his name comes at the beginning of the sentence, the ‘v’ will be capitalised.

6 Liminality has become so pervasive in postmodern literary criticism of the 1990s, that I deemed it necessary to go back to van Gennep’s own text in order to ensure that his schema of liminality would not be misrepresented. It is from this original source that this thesis, too, will adapt his useful framework to the demands of these particular texts.
Van Gennep accounts for the prevalence of ritual in all cultures by proposing that ritual, and by this he means in particular rites of passage, helps to mitigate the consequences of change. His theory, based on the observed customs of a very wide range of peoples, recognises that human life is composed of change:

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change room and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross. (1960: 189)

In other words, life is a series of thresholds that individuals and groups traverse, either by choice or by force. These changes are not without their dangers, however; therefore to ritualise them is to contain their risks and to give a seeming stability to ever-shifting existence. In his research, van Gennep found that

Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man’s life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined. (3)

The ceremonies designed by the community to which the individual belongs may be related to the concept of the Bildung referred to above: rituals are one way in which the society ‘plays the role of moulder, marking and maturing the protagonist’. They provide a means of establishing the individual’s place within the community by defining the individual’s state, and conferring a social status upon him or her. The advantage of this is that it protects the community’s status quo. Van Gennep notes, ‘Such changes of condition do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual, and it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects’ (13). By performing ritual, both the individual and the society are protected from potential ‘disturbance’.

In order to clarify his theory, van Gennep draws an analogy between the physical act of crossing a threshold and the transition in a rite of passage; he writes:
The passage from one social position to another is identified with a *territorial passage*, such as the entrance into a village or a house, the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of the streets and squares. This identification explains why the passage from one group to another is so often ritually expressed by passage under a portal, or by an ‘opening of the doors’. (192)

Van Gennep’s findings are echoed by Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s texts, in which the image of thresholds is used to demarcate transition between stages of life. The storyteller in *ES* explicitly structures the text into sections apparently governed or divided by doors and gateways corresponding to key stages of Zahra’s life. He says that the story is made up of ‘sept portes percées dans une muraille’ (13). This structure is first associated with the seven days of the week and then also used to represent the stages of Zahra’s social development from birth to marriage. In *FR*, Azaro refers to the threshold between the spirit and human words as the ‘dreaded gateway’ (5).

Van Gennep divides the rite of passage itself into three components. He proposes ‘to call the rites of separation from a previous world *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*’ (1960: 21). In other sections of the text, he refers to the phases as separation, transition and incorporation (11). These stages are thresholds within the larger threshold of the rite of passage. In fact, birth is both a literal and figurative passage, and one that provides the archetypal model for all rites of passage. The change that occurs in a rite of passage is represented by the death of the former identity, the passage over the threshold (the liminal stage), and the rebirth into a new social role or identity.

The liminal state is of vital importance to the individual’s change of status, which is also a change of identity or identification. Langdon Elsbree’s analysis of liminality in his book, *Ritual Passage and Narrative Structures*, explains this clearly:

   Liminality both initiates and becomes the process of change. It initiates change by severing the participants from whatever has been the merely customary or the enforced routine, and it thereby suggests these familiar realities are merely customary, time-bound, or routinized. (1991: 20)

That the participant is severed from his normal routine is consistent with van Gennep’s *preliminal rites* or *rites of separation*: the experience of liminality, because it separates the individual from the known and familiar, both confirms and calls into question the nature of what is normal and routine. It confirms it because the participant recognises he must return to

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For further corroboration see Simone Vienne, *Rite, rite, initiation* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1987) among others.
the normal state, but challenges it because the experience of something other allows the participant to re-think the normal and routine. The other facet of liminality explored by Elsbree relates to the postliminal or incorporation rites. He argues that liminality liberates ‘participants to be other than they have been, and it thereby directs their energies toward this otherness, often a new social identity or status’ (20). The new social identity or status achieved by the neophyte is completed in the postliminal rites, and it is recognised by the rest of the community. In each case, the liminal stage has made the other changes possible.

From this explanation of the original use of liminality, it is now possible to focus on the ways in which Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s novels subvert van Gennep’s initial definition. According to van Gennep’s schema of rites of passage, the liminal period, whilst essential for transition to occur, is necessarily of limited duration: the individual must move from one ‘well defined’ state to another. However, analysis of Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s texts reveals that, though their societies intend these rites of passage to be completed in the fashion described by van Gennep, the liminal period is often extended. This prolongation of the liminal period has deeply significant ramifications for the study of identity, for, if the liminal period does not end, it is difficult or impossible to identify or define the individual.

In her book, The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman, which analyses novels written in the late colonial and early postcolonial period, Nyatetu-Waigwa, whose definition of the Bildungsroman was used earlier to introduce the idea of development, demonstrates that the identity of the protagonists she examines is characterised by a failure to complete all three phases of the rite of passage. She finds that

the rite of passage for him remains incomplete, suspended forever in the liminal phase with regard to [the group] and other aspects of his culture.

The liminal novel, then, is a novel of coming of age in which the rite of passage, either overtly depicted [...] or implicitly invoked [...] remains suspended in the middle stage. At the close of the novel, the protagonist is still in the middle of the quest, either still moving towards what supposedly constitutes the final stage in that quest or having consciously suspended the adoption of a final stance. (1996: 3, my italics)

Though ES, NS, FR, and SE were written in the late 1980s or early 1990s and only retrospectively set near the end of colonial influence, Nyatetu-Waigwa’s findings are an excellent starting point to an exploration of the presentation of Azaro’s and Zahra’s development. The texts do seem to fit the description of ‘coming of age’ texts, and they contain several rites of passage that remain ‘suspended in the middle stage’. There is no neat resolution at the end of the texts, in which Zahra or Azaro reach the final stage or adopt a final stance, nor

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8The novels she examines are: Camara Laye’s L’Enfant noir, Hamidou Kane’s L’Aventure ambiguë, and Mongo Beti’s Mission terminée.
are they conspicuously and definitively seen as conventional members of their respective social communities. The most significant difference between the texts discussed by Nyatetu-Waigwa and the four to be examined in this thesis is in the interpretation of the last line of the quotation, referring to the protagonist’s conscious suspension of a final stance. In the novels she examines, Nyatetu-Waigwa finds that ‘the idea of the liminal hero bears significance precisely because the latent power it implies provides hope of eventual passage to a new status’ (130). Azaro and Zahra experience this latent power and, more significantly, deliberately choose to continue the quest without resolution of the inherent ambiguities within their identities. This choice to remain liminal is ultimately revealed to be more liberating than those based on a ‘final stance’. In fact, for them, liminality constitutes rather than contradicts or interferes with their identities. Through close comparative analysis of the ways in which Azaro and Zahra remain in the ‘middle stage’, both in terms of important social rites of passage and in their social status within their communities, this thesis will reach conclusions about the nature of identity as portrayed in these novels, the narrative strategies employed by Ben Jelloun and Okri to explore it, and the political implications of both.

It is also essential to take into consideration the link between the structure of rites of passage, and the traditional structure of narrative in order fully to understand the implications of the liminality, not only of the protagonists, but in their narratives. Langdon Elsbree argues that ‘as two ongoing homologically related activities, ritual and narrative are among the primary means we employ to structure ourselves and our societies and to generate the semantic systems which go beyond both self and society’ (1991: 1). Elsbree’s argument about the connection between ritual and narrative as structuring devices is of particular use when examining the narrative techniques of Ben Jelloun and Okri, which will be undertaken in the Conclusion of this thesis. Elsbree points out that

Wherever the complex forces of social upheaval and modernization work their effects, one will find writers who make these effects their subject: Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in Africa [...], etc. In principle, the homology between ritual and narrative should prove quite fruitful for those literatures and writers where the tensions of such social change and the search for adequate artistic techniques to render this change are paramount features of the culture. (2)

Such is the case in both Okri’s and Ben Jelloun’s texts. Okri does not spare the reader from scenes of abject poverty and political upheaval. The texts also display the effects of the modernisation of Madame Koto’s bar and the felling of the forest for roads and electricity. Ben Jelloun uses Zahra’s struggle for identity as a symbol of the upheaval entailed by colonisation and decolonisation. As previously suggested, the implications of Azaro’s and Zahra’s personal experience of identity formation reach beyond their individual situations. Analysis of them
sheds light on the concept of identity as a whole, particularly as the stories may be read as quasi-allegorical for the nations of Nigeria and Morocco, and further, because the texts are set in the late colonial period, but written with the hindsight of the 'postcolonial' perspective of their authors.

From the precise significance of identity and liminality of Azaro and Zahra as characters, it is now appropriate to examine the ways in which questions of identity are highlighted in the analysis of specifically colonial and postcolonial texts. The following section will situate Okri's and Ben Jelloun's work in their wider social, historical and academic context by outlining the growth of postcolonial studies and its preoccupation with the nature of identity. Throughout, specific examples from the two authors' backgrounds will be used to illuminate the issues under discussion.

IV. COLONISATION AND IDENTITY

Before launching into a discussion of colonisation and its effects, it is first useful to clarify that, though Ben Okri and Tahar Ben Jelloun both originate from the continent of Africa, this thesis does not propose that their individual cultural identities are the same. In fact, the Sahara desert is the Great Divide in Africa, traditionally signifying a cultural as well as geographical border, largely due to the influence of Islam in North Africa, though Nigeria's population is approximately 50% Muslim (Hauss 2000: 1). As Ben Jelloun says,

> In Morocco one tends to feel more Arab than African. We’re really in the northernmost part of Africa and we have a very different history. Personally, I don’t feel at all African. That’s not a pejorative or mean statement, but I don’t feel African because I have no ties to Africa. (Spear 1991: 31)

Okri, by contrast, does identify himself with Africa and considers himself an African. *FR* and *SE* contain several references to an African way of thinking or an African spirit. However, he confounds critics who would like to label him a Pan-African by saying,

> I’d like to propose that we stop making so narrow what constitutes the African aesthetic. It is not something that is bound only to place, it’s bound to a way of looking at the world. It’s bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions. It’s the aesthetic of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles—we love riddles—of paradoxes. I think we miss the element when we try to fix it too much within national or tribal boundaries. I think it’s more fluid and more interesting than that. When I read *Beowulf* I see Africa in that. (Wilkinson 1991: 87-8)

In statements such as these, Okri plays with the expectations of his interviewers and readers, for whom the West often continues to be the point of reference for their artistic standards,
despite an opening of the canon. Okri inverts the process by using Africa as his frame of reference and most powerful source of cultural identity. His Africa, however, is not a geographical as much as a spiritual entity. To return to the practical geographical and cultural differences between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, the differences already existing between the cultures of these regions were only exacerbated in the case of Morocco and Nigeria by different colonial strategies. In both cases, however, the problem of constructing an identity within a colonial and, later, postcolonial context is a key issue.

Colonisation inevitably had dramatic and indelible effects on the individual and ‘national’ identities of coloniser and colonised, though the effect on the former has yet to be fully explored. However, it would be naive to assume that the effects of colonisation on the inhabitants of Morocco and Nigeria are identical, as the colonial strategies of France and Britain were radically different. France adopted a policy of assimilation in most of its colonial dealings. Algerian children, for example, were taught that they were French, descended from ‘nos ancêtres les Gaulois’. In all of North Africa, cultural affiliations with Arabs or Berbers were institutionally ignored, minimising cultural differences between those two groups and alienating the children from their true cultural origins. Kamal Salhi asserts that this strategy ‘had the effect of breaking down the cultural identity of native children who entered the system’ (1999: 44). It should be noted, however, that Morocco was not a full colony; Belinda Jack points out that ‘the indigenous cultures of Morocco were less systematically undermined or destroyed than those of Algeria under French rule. A Berber literary tradition and a secular Arabic tradition survived the period of French occupation’ (1996: 185). Thus, though colonisation had significant effects on Morocco and its inhabitants, it cannot be compared to the consequences of a much longer and more destructive colonial period in Algeria. French colonial policy in Morocco is also significantly different from that of the British in Nigeria; rather than assimilation, Britain’s strategy was the opposite one more akin to ‘divide and rule’. Charles Hauss notes that in 1914 the British created a single Nigerian colony but administered the north and south separately until the very end of the colonial period. Thus began the often-conscious practice of deepening already existing divisions, thereby magnifying the problems the Africans would have to deal with once the country gained its independence. (2000: 11)

Instead of attempting to distance Nigerians from their tribal origins, British colonial rule emphasised them, often for political gain: if Nigerians were fighting amongst themselves, the risk of them fighting against the British was seen to be lessened. Indeed, the British ‘created tribes where no such organization had existed before’ (12), manufacturing a cultural identity, just as the French did by creating a completely fictitious French cultural ancestry for North Africans. In the case of Nigeria, Britain’s tactics radically altered not only the social organisation
of the country, but the ways Nigerians identified themselves. In fact, Nigeria continues to suffer from often extreme tension between the three largest tribal (or ethnic) groups: the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo.

These examples from Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s countries of origin demonstrate two ways that colonisation has significantly affected, restricted or thwarted the identity formation of peoples from formerly colonised nations. It comes as no surprise, then, that defining and understanding identity has been one of the biggest issues facing critics and artists from these regions. An examination of the evolution of ‘postcolonial studies’ from its earliest manifestation in the Négritude movement highlights the issues of identity that are so pertinent when examining Azaro’s and Zahra’s development.

A. NÉGRITUDE

Though there is a significant difference between postcolonial theory, which self-consciously examines and analyses issues related to postcolonial nations and peoples, and postcolonial literature, which is the literary artistic production of persons from formerly colonised nations that may or may not examine the same issues, in the period immediately preceding and following full political independence, much of the critical writing about the colonial experience and the need for independence was done by literary as well as intellectual figures. Thus, the literary production of these artists was consciously in aid of the political project of decolonisation. It was ‘engagé’—actively involved in the political struggle for independence. A case in point is the influential Négritude movement, begun by Senegalese poet Léopold Senghor and Martinican poet Aimé Césaire. This movement was based on the need to reverse the binary opposition of coloniser and colonised in which the latter was assumed to be inferior. As the name Négritude suggests, emphasis was placed on the white/black binary opposition as well as that of coloniser/colonised, as it is the assumption of racial superiority that served as justification for many of the colonising endeavours of Europeans nations. Négritude sought to reverse these assumptions, as Ania Loomba points out:

Nationalist struggles as well as pan-nationalist movements such as Negritude were fuelled by the alienation and the anger of the colonised. [...] many nationalists and anti-colonialists passionately, and often poetically appropriated the notion of a binary opposition between Europe and its others. Liberation, for them, hinged upon the discovery or rehabilitation of their cultural identity which European colonialism had disparaged and wrecked. (1998: 181)

Thus, in the texts produced from within the Négritude movement, the very qualities that were deemed negative by the coloniser were re-appropriated and lauded by the colonised. This movement was absolutely crucial in fostering a sense of pride in a cultural and racial identity
that had been denounced or derided, if not destroyed, with colonisation. The goal of *Négritude* was to create a proper ‘sens de l'identité noire’ because ‘La civilisation blanche, la culture européenne ont imposé au Noir une déviation existentielle. [...] souvent ce qu’on appelle l’âme noire est une construction du Blanc’ (Fanon 1995: 11). The recognition that any identity imposed on Blacks by colonisation is a false one led directly to a drive to create an ‘authentic’ identity constructed by Blacks and not Whites. One of the ways to create a cultural identity, which was initially a racial rather than national one, is through literature written by Blacks about their own experience.

Much of the literature produced in the years directly preceding and following political independence was the artistic counterpart to the theory of cultural rehabilitation in both North Africa and Nigeria. Kamal Salhi notes that

> The 1950s saw the rise of a North African literature that drew its inspiration from the anti-colonial struggle and the search for national identity. Authors like Kateb Yacine, Abdelkabir Khatibi, Mouloud Feraoun, Assia Djebar, Mouloud Mammeri, Mohammed Dib, Albert Memmi and Driss Chraïbi are associated with this movement. (1999: 40)

This ‘first generation’ of self-aware, politically active writers was enormously important to North Africa’s fight for independence, as well as its rehabilitation or establishment of a cultural and national identity. A similar group of writers emerged from Nigeria, most famously Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. *Négritude* has its problems, however, as even participants in the movement began to see that mere reversal of binary oppositions between Black and White and colonised and coloniser was not necessarily the best way to construct an identity. However, before a closer look at the shift away from *Négritude* is undertaken, the discussion will turn to two other thorny issues facing writers and critics in colonial and postcolonial studies: universality and the ‘language question’.

**B. UNIVERSALITY AND THE CANON**

Literature may be a valuable tool in the search for identity for the writer seeking an individual identity or a nation seeking expressions of national or cultural identity. Indeed, one way of understanding identity is through generic and cultural classification, though this can be problematic. The categorisation of texts written in languages of Empire by writers from formerly colonised nations has posed difficulties for Western and postcolonial readers alike: to what degree should these texts be categorised as ‘universal’ or seen as somehow ‘different’ from other types of literature already part of the Western canon? Though the terms ‘universal’ or ‘universality’ imply that distinctions of genre and cultural origin are unimportant to the reader’s understanding of the text and therefore the artistic judgement of that text, the complexities of such a term have been discussed at length in the domain of postcolonial studies from the
earliest stages of the discipline. Ato Quayson’s analysis of orality in Nigerian literature discusses critical approaches to African texts by Europeans and Africans that are clearly motivated by a need to see in these texts either their ‘universality’ (i.e. their use of European literary models) or their quintessentially ‘African’ (or foreign) qualities (i.e. their emphasis on oral tradition or local culture). He finds that ‘not only has an assumption of organicist relationships between traditional resources and African literature been sustained, but a notion of literature being either a receptacle or mirror of culture has also been dominant’ (1997: 2). If literature is seen as ‘either a receptacle or mirror of culture’, literary texts are liable to be interpreted as showing with nearly anthropological precision the ‘truth’ about a real (as opposed to fictitious) culture or to be judged on how authentically they portray that same real culture. Whilst the relationship between society and literature may be a productive area of enquiry, there is a danger of a kind of critical colonisation of a literary text if it is not frequently and explicitly noted that empirical reality and the kinds of realities created in fiction are not the same.

James Snead outlines the dangers of universality inherent, in my view, in any use of literature for political or cultural purposes: ‘Attributing “universality” to African writers—or expecting to find it in them—can merely be a question of (as in the case of political imperialism) a given observer projecting onto a neutral space a wish for power’ (1990: 238). To position Okri’s and Ben Jelloun’s texts within the English- or French-language canon by emphasising their ‘universal’ qualities ignores the political implications of such a stance. Okri is clearly conscious of the political nature of winning the Booker Prize. As Kate Muir writes,

After all, he has, this week, gone from being perceived as a slightly-known, black Nigerian writer, to a big name in English literature, who happens to come from Nigeria. ‘I am aware of all the ironies, of what people have said. Not a single nuance of tone has escaped me’. (1991: 15)

The award of the Booker Prize and subsequent critical acceptance of Okri into the Western literary tradition (despite, or perhaps because of, the novel’s ‘exotic’ tinge) has allowed the novel to slip underneath the barriers of national or cultural origin to become part of the Western canon, for the service of that canon—to perpetuate its seeming authoritative position of deciding what is and is not ‘great’ literature. In his response to Muir, Okri shows absolute awareness of this.

The other side of the ‘universality’ coin is ‘indigenous techniques’ or some similar equivalent. As Snead notes of the critical reception of Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, ‘when Tutuola’s style has been in question, the typical response has been, as in the discussion of “modern African literature” generally, to search for European or African precursors, but rarely to give the artist credit for willed craftsmanship’ (1990: 240). Chinua Achebe, one of the most well known Nigerian writers from the late 1950s to the 1980s, has also come under criticism for
his description of pre-colonial Igbo society in novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, which has ‘variously been praised and derided as “sociological” or “anthropological”’ (Snead 1990: 241). Nigerian texts are not the only ones to be victims of criticism from both sides. There is the double risk of too much attribution of ‘universality’ to texts, which would undermine their postcolonial authenticity, while at the same time too much emphasis on ‘indigenous’ techniques, which might further marginalise them. Argument surrounding this issue has left some writers multiply and contradictorily condemned. Of Driss Chraïbi, Gareth Stanton writes,

it is not possible to say that he is simply a ‘Maghrebí’ writer. Certainly some allusion must be made to the commentaries of the Nigerian, Chinua Achebe, who wrote that African authors are always criticised when they try to broach ‘universal’ issues, and are thought to be at their best when limiting themselves to detailed re-workings of exotic ‘local’ themes. Chraïbi’s work, when set in non-North African settings, has sometimes been received in the same way: deemed uninteresting by a French audience for not treating North African themes and seen as a betrayal by North African readers for much the same reason. (1999: xvi)

Stanton’s reference to Achebe demonstrates the extent to which there have been similarities in the difficulties facing writers from both the Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial world. One fact complicating this issue further is the language choice of these writers.

**C. THE LANGUAGE QUESTION**

As suggested in the brief look at two effects of colonisation stemming from the differing strategies of Britain and France, the education system was one of the most effective tools of colonisation. Much of its success came through the spread of the language of the coloniser. Many writers from former colonies were taught English or French and even forbidden to use their mother tongue. Thus, much of their literary production has also been in the language of the coloniser, making it accessible to the West, but causing controversy. Language choice has been one of the most hotly-contested issues in postcolonial studies because, as Frantz Fanon succinctly explains, ‘Parler, c’est être à même d’employer une certaine syntaxe, posséder la morphologie de telle ou telle langue, mais c’est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d’une civilisation’ (1995: 13). Because of the ‘weight of civilisation’ implicit in language, many postcolonial critics felt that postcolonial writers who used the languages of Empire were unable to speak the truth of their experience and, more, were somehow selling out to the coloniser. This debate became vigorous in the 1980s, and affected both Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial writers.

A famous example of a radical decision against the language of Empire is N’gugi wa Thiongo from Kenya, who originally wrote in English under the name James Ngugi, but who
changed his name in 1982 and began to write in his native Gikuyu. He consciously shifted his focus to a different target audience—his own people. He explained his choice in his last book in English, *Decolonising the Mind*. A similar choice was made by the North African Francophone writer Kateb Yacine who did not abandon French entirely, but came to a heightened awareness of the playwright's mission: ‘My objective has always been to reach my country and its public. [...] I am returning to what I wanted to do: a political theatre in a language widely accessible to the masses of common people. Henceforth I am going to wield two languages: French and especially colloquial Algerian Arabic’. (Quoted by Salhi 1999: 47-8)

These authors’ decision to reject or restrict their use of the language of Empire has not been emulated by all writers from the ‘postcolonial world’; quite the contrary, in fact.

The counter-argument to the rejection of the language imposed by the coloniser is multi-faceted. It must be accepted that the language of the coloniser is often the one the artist uses most fluently; to return to a language that has ceased to be a mother tongue, and may never have been a written one, does not necessarily ensure ‘authenticity’. And, indeed, if the artist wishes to reach the largest possible audience, the language of the coloniser may be the most appropriate choice, not only in the West, but in the former colony, in which the language of Empire allowed many indigenous peoples from diverse language groups to communicate with each other for the first time. Most importantly, many artists argue that languages of Empire are an invaluable tool for subverting the very structures they were designed to uphold, and that they are necessarily changed to accommodate the reality they expresses in these regions. Chinua Achebe states,

*I have been given this language and I intend to use it... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.* (Quoted in Loomba 1998: 91)

The English language for Achebe is malleable, fully able to adapt to the different circumstances it must describe. Thus, to reject English simply because of its colonial legacy would be to deny that it is the language that best expresses the world he seeks to convey.

The ‘language question’ remained unresolved throughout the 1980s, though it became less prevalent in the late 1990s. However, Ben Jelloun and Okri have both been asked about it. In fact, Ben Jelloun comes under vitriolic attack in Jacqueline Kaye’s and Abdelhamid Zoubir’s 1990 book, *The Ambiguous Compromise: Language, Literature and National Identity in Algeria and Morocco*. They assert that a writer is necessarily alienated from his culture when he writes in a language of Empire. They state that Ben Jelloun’s work specifically is trapped
within a discourse of Moroccan degradation and humiliation that makes the authentic elements of Moroccan culture irretrievable. Only a western [sic] readership whose taste has been debased by its participation in the hegemonic inferiorisation of other cultures could provide an audience for this kind of decadence—and give it a prize. (Quoted in Stanton 1999: xxxvii)

Theirs is a position that violently opposes the theory that a language of Empire could ever be used to subvert. However, it should be remembered that Arabic itself was once a language of colonisation in North Africa when the Arab Muslims invaded this area from 705 to 740 A.D. (Munson 1993: xvii). Kaye’s and Zoubir’s focus on authenticity implicitly invokes the idea of pre-colonial Moroccan culture, without accepting that this ‘authentic’ culture is, regardless of the language used, irretrievable in the form that it existed before colonisation.

Ben Jelloun himself expresses a position much more like Chinua Achebe’s quoted above. He says that

I’m really not at ease in Arabic [...] I often say that the fact of writing in French is a way for us to be somewhat bold and also to be relevant, because, when one writes in Arabic, one is slightly intimidated by the language of the Koran. To my knowledge, there is no writer in Arabic, at least no modern writer, who has tried to do violence to the Arabic language. It’s hard to do. There is no tradition in Arabic of work on language, as there is, for example with Joyce or even Faulkner. (Spear 1993: 34)

Ben Jelloun’s choice to use French is anything but ignorant; writing in French allows him the opportunity to ‘do violence’ to language in order to express something new. Rather than being colonised by his use of French, Ben Jelloun is liberated to express a more ‘relevant’ and authentic personal truth.

Okri has not been strongly criticised for his choice to use English, which remains one of the official languages of Nigeria. Questions about it are almost inevitable, however. His response is typically enigmatic.

To write in a language you have to be inhabited by it. That’s basic. The thing about language is frames. You have feelings, a mood—a way of life. A language inhabits you; if you know the language well enough and you know your feelings strongly enough and you’re deeply rooted in your world and if you care enough about your art and about life you can get any language to say what you want to say. Even Shakespeare seemed to me to write from an invisible handicap. Where there isn’t a handicap you have to invent one. (Wilkinson 1991: 82)
Okri, like Ben Jelloun, seems to see the choice of a particular language as a personal, rather than a political decision, though that language is then used to express a personal and political reality. It is necessary to choose a language that inhabits one entirely in order to have the familiarity and freedom then to test its boundaries to the utmost. Thus, writing in English does not prevent Okri from exploring what is important to him, nor does he accept that he is 'betraying his culture' by writing in English. In fact, he seems to welcome the notion that it may have some element of 'handicap' to it: language, Okri suggests, is by its nature slippery and difficult. This handicap, he implies, may provide a valuable way of exploring multiple realities.

The early debates regarding literature and criticism from formerly colonised nations—the tenets of Négritude, universality versus local specificity; and the language question—have rapidly evolved to encompass issues such as the differences between the postcolonial and the postmodern, hybridity and liminality. The following section will outline these more current concerns and focus on their relevance to the study of Ben Jelloun's and Okri's texts.

V. ORIENTALISM AND THE GROWTH OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

The 1978 publication of Edward Said's Orientalism revolutionised the study of formerly colonised nations by providing the first systematic examination of the ways that colonial discourse created an image of the colonised and 'emphasized the ways in which seemingly impartial, objective academic disciplines had in fact colluded with, and indeed been instrumental in, the production of actual forms of colonial subjugation and administration' (Young 1999: 12). Though scholars such as Dennis Porter have criticised Orientalism, saying that Said's argument may be read as contributing to 'the perpetuation of that Orientalist thought he set out to demystify in the first place' (1994: 152), it remains a seminal work in postcolonial studies. Close discourse analysis such as Said's helped to shift the central debates in postcolonial studies away from the binary opposition of coloniser and colonised, just as critics and artists such as Achebe predicted should occur:

You have all heard of the 'African personality'; of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up, we shan't need any of them anymore. (1988: 30)

Achebe's statement demonstrates a clear understanding that 'cultural rehabilitation' or 'decolonising the mind', as N'gugi wa Thiongo termed it, is a process—and one that is not entirely removed from the ritual process described by Arnold van Gennep. Construction of identity has moved from the colonially imposed well-defined state of native inferiority to the well-defined equal and opposite superiority invoked by Négritude, and has now arguably entered a new liminal stage. In this new stage, postcolonial artists and critics have found it necessary to
look toward the present and future rather than solely the past in order to understand any kind of postcolonial identity.

For many, disillusionment with the continued poverty and political chaos of the post-Independence era caused a shift from the celebration and optimism of Négritude to a more nuanced discussion of universality, language, and identity. This is the case in Morocco, where the monarch, Hassan II, who reigned with an iron hand from 1953 to 1999, came under criticism for human rights violations; and also in Nigeria, which was torn apart by the Biafran war from 1966 to 1969 and then suffered under a series of military dictatorships also until 1999. The 'props' to which Achebe refers have now been abandoned in favour of recognition of differences between postcolonial countries, projects and individuals. Perhaps ironically, this second stage of postcolonial writing, which shifted focus away from the standards of the West, was primarily led by theorists such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who were based at European or North American universities. As Robert Young points out,

"The genealogy of postcolonial study in its present form can be traced to the arrival in universities in Europe and America of people from the colonial margins who then asked awkward questions about Western history and the implicit assumptions of Western knowledges. (1994: 18)"

These awkward questions led to the explosion of postcolonial studies in the 1980s and 1990s, enhanced by publications of important texts in the field such as *The Empire Writes Back* in 1989, written by Australian academics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. The field of postcolonial studies is currently characterised by a profusion of differing ideas about the discipline's purpose or 'project' now that political independence has been achieved and the initial unity of struggle is no longer in existence. There has also been a greater divide created between Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial critics: since Négritude the focus has shifted to the English-speaking world. For example, the *Post-colonial Studies Reader* (edited by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*) focuses entirely on postcolonial writing in English. This separation of the study of Francophone and Anglophone postcolonial literature is particularly interesting because much of the postmodern and feminist literary theory used in postcolonial studies was originally written in French by the likes of such theorists as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva. Though the English-speaking 'academy' makes free use of such theorists, it has not often included Francophone postcolonial literature in its study. However, it is possible that in future

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more links will be made between the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. A beginning has
been made with such texts as John Erickson’s 1998 book, *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative*, which
looks at texts from both languages and uses Islam as the unifying comparative device. The
difference between the approaches taken by Angolphone and Francophone critics toward texts
that may be classified as ‘postcolonial’ will be amplified at the end of this chapter.

The examination of the ways that postcolonial studies has set about creating, affirming
and defining itself will begin with the central debate about the extent to which the postcolonial
and the postmodern are similar.\(^\text{10}\)

A. THE POSTCOLONIAL AND THE POSTMODERN

The debate surrounding the relationship of the postmodern to the postcolonial has
been very active amongst postcolonial critics and is of relevance to Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s
work because of its political connotations. A brief examination of the origins and main
principles on which postmodern theory has been based will be undertaken before closer study
of the ways in which postcolonial scholars have sought to distance themselves and postcolonial
artistic production from postmodernism.

‘Postmodernism’ as a term to describe new movements in contemporary culture came
into wide use in the mid-1970s and from then has become pervasive through a wide range of
academic discipline such as philosophy, architecture, and literature. One of the fundamental
texts of early postmodern theory was Jean-François Lyotard’s *La Condition postmoderne*, published
in French in 1979 and appearing in English in 1984. In this text, Lyotard analyses the
emergence of postmodernism in the West and its defining characteristics; the most important
of these, in terms of the postmodern/postcolonial debate, is that of the

http://classweb.gmu.edu/chauss/cponline/nigeria.htm, 1-48. More details about the political circumstances in both
countries will be given throughout the thesis, as necessary.
\(^{10}\)There was a lively debate in the 1990s within the disciplines of postmodern and postcolonial studies about the
hyphen separating the ‘post’ from the ‘modern’ and ‘colonial’. Steven Connor gives a good synthesis of the dropping
of the hyphen from ‘postmodern’ in his Introduction to the second edition of *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to
Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), in which he defines the shift as
that from ‘genealogical to analogical postmodernism’ (viii) because the prefix ‘post’ with no hyphen is now being used
in disciplines that have no historical experience of modernity. A similar move from hyphen to no hyphen has
occurred in postcolonial studies, though for a slightly different (and more political) reason. Vijay Mishra and Bob
Hodge argue that when the hyphen is dropped, ‘postcolonialism’ may be used as ‘an always present tendency in any
literature of subjugation marked by a systematic process of cultural domination through the imposition of imperial
structures of power’, rather than as merely ‘oppositional postcolonialism’, of the kind seen in movements like
Negritude (1994: 284). I do not intend to make any political statement by dropping the hyphen in both, but have
chosen to do so because this is the general trend. Inconsistencies may arise in quotations from some sources whose
authors have made a different decision.
‘suspicion of metanarratives’, those universal guiding principles and mythologies which once seemed to control, delimit and interpret all the diverse forms of discursive activity in the world [...] The postmodern condition, we are told repeatedly [in Lyotard’s text], manifests itself in the multiplication of centres of power and activity and the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation. (Connor 1997: 8)

In the larger domain of culture, postmodernism has led to the interrogation of all values and assumptions, thereby dismantling conventionally-accepted hierarchies. In his postmodern investigations, Jean Baudrillard goes as far as to suggest that ‘all of contemporary life has been dismantled and reproduced in scrupulous facsimile’ (Connor 1997: 56), creating what Baudrillard calls the ‘hyperreal’. In the world of the hyperreal, in which simulation is the only reality, ‘all real antagonisms or dichotomies of value, especially in the political sphere’ (57) may be seen as having collapsed. These collapsing ‘antagonisms’ or ‘dichotomies’ may also be seen at the level of language, in which the signifier has been freed from the signified (as seen in the techniques of deconstruction). All of these changes bring with them possible liberation, and much postmodernist theory has been a celebration of the de-centring of the ‘totalizing metanarratives’ of the past. However, it is this very de-centring that poses both promise and problems for those engaging in postcolonial studies. And, indeed, even within the domain (if there can be said to be one) of postmodernism there is a strange paradox, as Connor observes. First, postmodernism has been seized upon by such a wide variety of domains for such diverse purposes that it is difficult to define comprehensively it in all its permutations. This would seem to be logical in a movement that seeks to dismantle grand narratives. And yet, the pervasiveness of postmodernism means that it has itself become a kind of ‘grand narrative’, its very ‘incommensurability [...] bound, controlled and predictively interpreted, given a centre and illustrative function’ (9). Attempted resolution of this paradox is not the purpose of this thesis; what is of importance here is the prominence of postmodernism in contemporary culture, which affects its perceived relationship to postcolonialism. Further explication of the characteristics of postmodernism will be given through contrast with postcolonialism, the rise of which coincided with the revolution in literary studies that came from postmodernism and poststructuralism.11 Certainly, one of the main concerns of postcolonial studies has been to interrogate the totalising ‘metanarrative’ or ‘grand narrative’ of the West in relation to all forms of knowledge. It will be seen in this thesis that, in various ways, Ben Jeloun and Okri challenge the idea of a totalising narrative structure for the stories of their respective protagonist’s lives. However, despite similarities such as resistance to absolute objective realism and privileging of

11Like Sylvia Söderlind, I am referring to postmodernism as ‘a (predominantly North American) artistic practice which is closely related to its (predominantly French) theoretical counterpart, poststructuralism’ (D’haen and Bertens 1994: 42).
contextualism and fragmentation, there is a strong need in postcolonial criticism to make distinctions between itself and postmodern criticism.

Postcolonial critics are loath to be grouped with a movement that may not represent their project, or one which appropriates it and assumes it is the same. Indeed, as critics such as Homi K. Bhabha point out, postmodernism could be read, in many ways, as owing a debt to the postcolonial, not the reverse. Bhabha states in *The Location of Culture* that he 'has tried, in some small measure, to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial' (1994: 175). This is possible partly because

It is arguable that dominant European movements, such as postmodernism, which have sought in recent times to re-absorb post-colonial writing into an international postmodern discourse, may themselves, in fact, be more indebted to the cultural effects of the material practice of colonization and its aftermath than is usually acknowledged.

(Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 156)

As these critics convincingly show in *The Empire Writes Back*, it was largely through colonisation, contact with the Other, that the stability of Western modes of thought came to be challenged. Though the general attitude of colonisation was that of civilising the savage, the 'savage's' art and rituals had a powerful effect on the Arts in the West. It could be also be argued, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, that the Other's art 'called into question the basic assumptions of European aesthetics' (157). From the questioning of aesthetics, it is not a large step to the interrogation of other values, the hallmark of the postmodernist movement.

The issue of what may, to adapt a phrase of Harold Bloom's, be called the 'anxiety of influence' between the postcolonial and the postmodern aside, there has also been heated discussion about the problems of conflating the postcolonial with the postmodern. The topic may be broadly divided into two interrelated areas. The first of these is a revised concept of universality, assuming that postcolonial studies is a subsection of the postmodern, thereby ignoring the differences between the two fields of study. The second aspect of the postcolonial/postmodern debate is the suggestion that too-close similarities with postmodernism may undermine any postcolonial project because of its assumed apolitical and ahistorical stance.

Lucy Stone McNeece gives a good account of the first area of debate:

The question of the relation of the post-modern to the post-colonial is, of course, highly complex. It is not so only because the condition we loosely term 'post-modern' in the West is so varied in its manifestations and so difficult to define, but because its effects are experienced and therefore judged differently by different classes and cultural groups. (1995: 34-5)
McNeece here clearly recognises the social, historical, economic and political issues at stake, even if one is applying the term ‘postmodern’ to writers and their literary production. She further explains:

"For example, the supposedly liberating effects upon certain groups of the principle of indeterminacy and the break-up of totalising myths are often undermined by the indiscriminate commodification of their cultural productions. [...] The very rhetoric of difference tends to supplant any sustained attempt to articulate specific dissonances within an increasingly monotonous hymn to ‘multiculturalism’. (1995: 35)"

McNeece suggests that, though multiculturalism in postmodernism seeks to embrace difference, it can, paradoxically, become a means of stifling it, because everything is equal and must be tolerated equally. This has the potential completely to eradicate the ability to discuss ‘dissonances’. Homi K. Bhabha’s definition of postcolonial criticism\(^\text{12}\) marks out a criticism that is highly sensitive to dissonance and firmly rooted in the ‘real world’ in terms of its recognition of all manner of power differentials between the West and its ‘Others’. He writes,

"Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the ‘rationalizations’ of modernity. (1994: 171)"

Bhabha’s focus on the ‘ambivalent’ and ‘antagonistic’ sharply contrasts with McNeece’s interpretation of the anodyne ‘hymn to multiculturalism’. It is logical to infer that postmodernism itself may be one of the discourses that attempts to ‘give a hegemonic “normality”’ to uneven development in Third World countries. Though it is undeniable that, for some, the ‘principle of indeterminacy’ and the ‘break-up of totalising myths’ have been liberating, it is dangerous to assume that the whole world has experienced them as such. The assumption that postmodernism is universal, experienced everywhere in the same way, is

\(^{12}\)It should be noted here that Bhabha is referring to criticism rather than literary production. His comments are particularly relevant not to Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s motivations for what they write, but postcolonial critical interpretation of it.
predicated on the belief that all crises of stability are the same, all experiments with form and their motivation derive from the same impulse. The fatal flaw in such an assumption is that the 'Third World' has not had the same past as the West: the West cannot expect that African postmodernism is the same or even that it exists. Indeed, as several critics have argued, what does the 'post' in postmodern mean to nations and individuals that never experienced the Modernism that implicitly preceded it?\textsuperscript{13}

The second, related, aspect to the danger of a universalising or homogenising postmodernism is the problem of the supposedly apolitical nature of postmodernism. Diana Brydon argues that postmodernism may lead to a symbolic paralysis because it becomes unacceptable to have a strong opinion, to advocate change, to fight for a belief. She focuses on the ambivalence that comes from the 'ability to see all sides, to defer judgement and to refuse agency' and goes on to ask:

What are the effects of this ambivalence? It would seem to suggest that action is futile; that individual value judgements are likely to cancel each other out; that one opinion is as good as another; that it would be futile and dishonest to choose one path above any other; that disinterested contemplation is superior to any attempt at action. In effect, then, ambivalence works to maintain the status quo. (1995: 137)

The ideology of postmodernism can be said to advocate inaction because it presumes to abandon value judgements and, along with it, any recognition of inequality. This means that it is also criticised for being apolitical. Ambivalence within postmodernism is different from that advocated by Bhabha in postcolonial criticism: by pointing out 'ambivalent moments within the "rationalizations" of modernity', the postcolonial critic is herself avoiding ambivalence and taking action. Because it is focused on the world as a text rather than any historical context, and because it seems to advocate a situation in which every interpretation is equally valid, there are those who feel this is intellectually both naive and irresponsible. Critical reaction to Ben Jelloun's and Okri's work highlights the postcolonial/postmodern debate and their (and their texts') position in it, though a 'final' position on how their work is best interpreted will only be possible after the four novels have been examined closely in the main chapters of this thesis. The following sections comprise one part of a review of secondary literature written about these authors' texts to be continued near the end of this Introduction as a means to situate this thesis within the current scholarship on these writers.

\textsuperscript{13}A classic example of such investigation is Anthony Appiah's article, 'Is the post- in postmodernism the post- in postcolonial?', \textit{Critical Inquiry} 17 (Winter 1991) 336-57.
B. CRITICAL RESPONSE

Ben Jelloun's and Okri's novels have been alternately praised and blamed by different critics for the same qualities, depending on whether they are assigned postcolonial or postmodern characteristics. John Hawley, in his essay, 'Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: Abiku Migration and Postmodernity', says of Okri what could also be said of Ben Jelloun: 'The debate over the possible points of intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism is by no means settled, and the case of Ben Okri raises interesting questions in this regard' (1995: 33). Okri and Ben Jelloun both come from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds. This varied background manifests itself in their texts in the form of, amongst other elements, intertextuality.

i. INTERTEXTUALITY

Both authors use the mythologies of their native regions, as well as those from Western and other sources. Okri and Ben Jelloun choose to exploit diverse sources, refusing to treat them as mutually exclusive. Each is unashamedly 'contaminated' by all of the elements of his background. Finding the distinctions between the African and European within the texts becomes increasingly difficult, especially as the authors' forms and styles contain elements that could be attributed to both simultaneously. The endless referring to other texts blurs the boundaries of the text in which the references appear, especially as, in common with most writers of fiction, neither Okri nor Ben Jelloun cites a bibliography at the end of his texts. This is not to say that all of the references and ideas expressed in their texts coexist harmoniously. In fact, their use of intertextual references does not naively support the argument discussed earlier about the 'universality' of ideas; rather, it calls the reader to question the notion of what is 'universal', and in what universe. In other words, like Okri's response to Muir's comment, the use of intertextuality by postcolonial authors may work to de-centre the West. Thus, both authors play with the expectations of readers and are aware of the implications of their choices.

Within this play with expectations, however, there is a danger that intertextuality, especially when it includes Western texts, may lead the reader to assume that there are no differences between the texts combined. Intertextuality is an issue that poses problems for those seeking to understand how Okri and Ben Jelloun fit into the postcolonial or postmodern moulds. McNeece's observations about Ben Jelloun are equally true of Okri. She writes:

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14Lucy Stone McNeece has commented upon Ben Jelloun's multilingual background in her article; Okri's multilingual background is not as easy to establish. However, his texts use numerous words and phrases from various African languages, showing at least some familiarity with them.
Ben Jelloun has been praised by critics in the West for his sophisticated style but condemned by many Moroccans for betraying his culture. Like many post-colonial authors writing in French—or other languages of Empire—Ben Jelloun naturally invites criticism from those who conceive of national and cultural identity in linguistic terms. Yet he has also sparked debate because he seems to ignore the ‘serious’ political and social issues plaguing his culture, content to play seductively with his readers on both sides of the Mediterranean. (1995: 32)

Seductive play with readers is more often viewed as a characteristic of postmodernism than postcolonialism, which strongly resists attempts to bury ‘serious political and social issues’. Hawley states that Okri ‘wishes [...] to recognize and celebrate a distinctive way of encountering and describing reality: he has an aesthetic, rather than overtly political or psychological, aim’ (1995: 32). There is a direct parallel in Hawley’s remarks to those McNeece makes in her article: ‘Ben Jelloun seems to be using language and narrative form as a mode of experimentation that has no objective other than to delight in its own artful energy’ (1995: 32). Thus, postcolonial literary critics have not always found the writers’ texts concerned enough with unevenness of power relations between the West and its former colonies. Various critics, such as Nnolim in the case of Okri and Lowe in the case of Ben Jelloun, ‘show a need to demonstrate the political consciousness’ (Hawley 1995: 34) of each writer despite some apparent difficulty in doing so. That the authors’ styles fit many of the criteria of magical realism simply emphasises the tension created.

ii. MAGICAL REALISM

One way to illuminate the critical response to Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s texts is by looking at them in relation to magical realism. Most often used to discuss South American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, there has recently been a move to categorise some African fiction in this way as well. Both Okri and Ben Jelloun have been classed as magical realist writers, though not exclusively or primarily.15 Lois Parkinson Zamora’s and Wendy Faris’ book, Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, helps to define the identifying characteristics of magical realism, which is

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15Brenda Cooper’s book Magical Realism: Seeing with a Third Eye (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) which devotes two chapters to Okri, discusses him in this context, whilst John Ericsson’s article ‘Metokoi and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narrative of Tahar ben Jelloun and Abdelkébir Khatibi’ in Zamora’s and Faris’ book does the same.
a mode suited to experience—and transgress—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds—in phenomenal or spiritual regions where transformations, metamorphoses, dissolutions are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism. [...] Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts. (1995: 5-6)

Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s texts both mix traditionally realistic narrative with more fantastic elements and experimental narrative form. They also explore the permeable divisions between male and female or spirit and human, both examples of liminal territories that this thesis will explore. McNeece says of Ben Jelloun that

His hybrid use of linguistic conventions encourages his readers to explore other dimensions of experience (dream, myth, fantasy) that transport them away from familiar routines and habits of thought and feeling so that they may perceive analogies and relations that are normally invisible. In these altered states, fixed boundaries between worlds such as those of myth and history, fact and fiction, slip away to allow for unexpected associations and configurations of meaning. (1995: 38)

The ‘altered states’ to which McNeece refers may be read as liminal ones, similar to the ‘liminal territory’ that Zamora and Paris suggest is favoured by magical realist texts. Okri and Ben Jelloun resist fixed boundaries in their writing through various means: reality is not presented as two-dimensional, with every character experiencing the same elements at the same time; and meaning is found through the juxtaposition of contrasts and ideas with seemingly nothing in common. The invitation to explore variations of reality is equally present in Okri’s writing.

Ogunsanwo asserts that

a distinguishing feature of [Okri’s] narrative art [...] is an astonishingly swift shift from the conventional versimilar description of the world of discrete things in the Western manner of narration to the mythopoeic description of the “other reality” [...] This shift occurs all the more strikingly within a single paragraph or within a single sentence, and it is [...] seamless. (1995: 43)
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Both authors use conventional forms in unconventional ways as well as new techniques. Neither presents fixed boundaries between reality and fantasy or Western and African references and ways of seeing.

Though magical realism is a mode often adopted by writers from Third World, postcolonial or emerging nations, its very play with the boundaries of reality leave it open to some of the criticisms levelled at postmodern writing. Kumkum Sangari's comments highlight the problem he perceives with what he calls the 'transformative spaces in a text'. He asserts that

The transformative spaces in a text—that is, those which do not readily give up their meaning—are the crucial node of its depoliticization. The enigma in Márquez's narratives can be read as a radical contextual figure or can be recuperated as yet another self-reflexive instance of the postmodern meaning representation problematic. The synchronic time-space of postmodernism becomes a modality for collapsing other kinds of time—most notably, the politically charged time of transition. (1995: 144)

Because magical realism is a mode full of such transformative spaces and fluidity and because it deals with the liminal, which by its nature is outside of normal time and routine, it may be interpreted as apolitical or depoliticised, which may in fact undermine the postcolonial project. However, Zamora and Faris would argue the opposite. They contend that 'magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweeness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologous political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women' (1995: 6). It could be argued for both Ben Jelloun and Okri as McNeece does for Ben Jelloun alone:

We may find, surprisingly, that instead of constituting an 'escape' from reality, Ben Jelloun's writing seeks to re-focus his readers' relation to a history that has been dramatically blind to a host of realities. (1995: 38)

As later chapters of this thesis will show, the transformative spaces in Ben Jelloun's and Okri's texts that re-envision history may certainly be read as subversive. The invitation to read in a new way, to put aside expectations, opens the reader to many new realms of experience and reality. As Zamora's and Faris' analysis suggests, Ben Jelloun's and Okri's work continually challenges essentialism or reductivity from any side.

One conclusion that may be drawn from this brief look at the debate within postcolonial studies is put forth by Gareth Griffiths and David Moody:
It is [...] necessary to avoid the pretence that theory in post-colonial literature [...] is somehow conceived independently free from all coincidence, or even that these theories have functioned merely as ‘context’ for the recent developments in post-colonial criticism (whose origins, it is implied, lie elsewhere in some prior and timeless dimension raised above history and its determinants). No simple theory of ‘origins’ is of much use here. If anything emerges clearly [...] it is that the contemporary African intellectual inhabits a world of profound and inescapable hybridity. (1989: 78)

To pretend that the discourses of postmodernism have no role in the discourses of postcolonialism is to assume that the postcolonial can live in isolation, or should try to. Resolution of the postmodern/postcolonial debate is elusive and outwith the scope of this thesis, but the recurrence of the term hybridity is evocative and deserves greater attention if it is to assist the situation of Ben Jelloun and Okri within these critical and intellectual landscapes.

C. HYBRIDITY

For many postcolonial critics, hybridity has become the defining characteristic of postcolonial identity. Hybridity was unavoidable for those born under colonial rule: the colonising country had ultimate control over education, media and politics. However, even today, the legacy of colonisation remains fresh, and now is supplemented by so-called neo-colonialism or neo-imperialism, in which the affluent West not only markets its products in former colonies, but owns a controlling interest in many or most of the financially successful industries in these countries. As Sanjeev Uprety remarks,

In the case of third-world identities, hybridity is not only a matter of choice, but—more than in any other context—an issue of survival. A third-world subject must memorize the history of other nations, learn other languages, and adopt other fathers if he/she is to acquire a proper place in the social and economic ladder. (1997: 376)

Uprety’s comments highlight the all-pervasive nature of hybridity in formerly colonised nations. Beyond this practical, concrete hybridity, the trope of hybridity has been accepted and celebrated within postcolonial studies. Homi K. Bhabha and others have focused on the positive elements that a multi-layered vision of the world can give to the individual. Uprety summarises current critical attitudes toward hybridity thus:
In recent years there has been a tendency in contemporary theoretical formulations to consider hybridity not as a ‘moral marker of ... contamination, failure or regression’ (Papastergiadis, 9), but a positive concept that signifies the possibility of creative growth and understanding. Taking his cue from Rushdie, Bhabha speaks of the sense of empowerment and ‘migrant’s double vision’ (5) in this space of hybridity and transformation, and Braidotti similarly describes the hybrid, ‘nomadic’ state in terms of empowerment and agency. For her the nomadic state does not consist in the literal act of travelling but in the ‘subversion of set conventions’ (5). Identities rooted in a hybrid space do not only occupy a privileged position of understanding at the crossroads of different cultures; their unique position also allows them to subvert and rewrite the cultural codes by using one cultural/symbolic system against another. From their vantage point of ‘double vision’, those with hybrid identities can perceive they can have an understanding of multiple cultures, and they can use that understanding to create new [sic] forms of thought, new ways of aesthetic and political expression. (369)

Hybridity is a concept that turns its back on the kind of ‘cultural rehabilitation’ that was prevalent in the early days of political Independence. Rather than focusing on an idealised pre-colonial past, a theory of hybridity emphasises the here-and-now, the daily realities reflecting how a postcolonial culture and its participants have actually rather than ideally evolved. This acceptance of the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism that does not necessarily then turn to the West for identity has the potential to be enormously liberating and empowering, as critics such as Bhabha have recognised when they celebrate the ‘migrant’s double vision’. As the previous references to critical reception of Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s work show, ‘hybridity’ or ‘hybrid’ are commonly used to in relation to it; however, further discussion will suggest that, for this thesis, these terms are not necessarily the most appropriate; liminality will be proposed as a more promising alternative.

D. LIMINALITY

Liminality is relevant to the discussion at hand in terms of its relationship to hybridity in postcolonial criticism and its further applicability for the four novels on which this thesis will be based. The similarities between the two will be outlined first before a discussion of the reason why liminality is the better choice in terms of this thesis. Liminality, like hybridity, emphasises the position of being in-between, unavoidably connected to at least two cultures, identities, and moments or states of being. Van Gennep states that the liminal being (or liminar) ‘wavers between two worlds’ (1960: 18). However, it is Turner’s connection between the type of liminality that occurs within a ritual situation and a kind of social liminality, which exists normally within the society, that invites further comparison with hybridity. Turner writes:
The point I would like to stress here is that there is a certain homology between the 'weakness' and 'passivity' of liminality in diachronic transitions between states and statuses, and the 'structural' or synchronic inferiority of certain personae, groups and social categories in political, legal, and economic systems. The 'liminal' and the 'inferior' conditions are often associated with ritual powers and with the total community seen as undifferentiated. (1969: 99-100)

Within a globalised world, neither the hybrid nor the liminar is at the centre of power. The whole 'hybrid' community (if the term 'community' applies) is, the earlier quotation by McNeece suggests, at risk of being seen as 'undifferentiated', victims of the 'monotonous hymn' to multiculturalism.

Moreover, it would be naive to assume that all liminalities and hybridities are positive expressions of agency. After the initial euphoria in postcolonial studies when the term hybridity was first used to signify the benefits of 'double vision', critics are increasingly pointing out its negative aspects. Uprety is quite insistent on this point: 'Various symbols, languages, laws, and fathers are engaged in a perpetual contest within that hybrid space—a contest that often results not in an experience of empowerment and double vision, but in an experience of multiple alienation and disability' (1997: 381). Thus, the nomadic hybrid may end up feeling de-centred and homeless, without the usual landmarks that give consistency to a changing world. Langdon Elsbree points out that liminality also has its negative side. He, unlike Uprety, focuses on choice as the main distinguishing feature between the positive and negative faces of liminality. He argues that 'there is another side to liminality, characteristic in the narratives of many cultures [...]. This is the liminality that is unchosen, unwanted, unexpected, more notable for the ways it isolates, desolates, at times terrorizes' (1991: 20). This negative aspect of liminality is experienced by both Azaro and Zahra, particularly when they are forced to comply with the social expectations that do not adequately represent them: Azaro is expected to act like a human child, Zahra like a boy.

Likewise, both liminars and hybrids have been the object of fear or moral disgust. This is indicated by Papastergiadis' statement about the 'original' meaning of hybridity as "'contamination, failure or regression'" (quoted by Uprety and cited above). Turner observes that 'liminal situations and roles are almost everywhere [...] regarded as dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting to persons, objects, events and relationships that have not been ritually incorporated into the liminal context' (1969: 108-9). And, indeed, Turner's response to why these situations and role are so regarded may also be applied to hybridity and the hybrid. He finds that for those who are interested in maintaining the cultural, social or political status quo, sustained liminality 'must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions and conditions' (109). The hybrid and the liminar are dangerous
to the status quo because of their very nature of being either between two worlds (the liminar) or participating in two or more worlds (the hybrid).

In observing and elaborating this homology, Turner gives liminality a much wider significance than its original place within ritual or rite of passage. His theory of liminality, as he states himself, is

a hypothesis that seeks to account for the attributes of such seemingly diverse phenomena as neophytes in the liminal phase of ritual, subjugated autochthones, small nations, court jesters [etc ...] All have this common characteristic: they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs. (125)

The use of liminality in postcolonial studies is already suggested by Turner in his inclusion of ‘subjugated autochthones’ in his list of those who are liminal. Hybrids, too, by their nature, will ‘fall in the interstices of social structure’ if they are not also ‘on its margins’ or occupying the ‘lowest rungs’. The liminal state, for Turner, temporarily frees the individual from van Gennep’s ‘well defined states’, in which the human ‘is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding incumbents of social positions in a system of such positions’ (Turner 1969: 95). Social liminality is much more dangerous than ritually-induced liminality, as it is not as easily regulated as the rigid structures of ritually-induced liminality; indeed, the only way to contain the threat posed by those who are socially liminal is to marginalise them, and place them at the bottom of the ‘system of social positions’ upon which the community relies for order. Building on Turner’s definition, the hybrid can be considered a liminal being, with his or her power to ‘subvert set conventions’ deriving from this liminal status. However, the hybrid is not necessarily always also a liminar. Further discussion will help to clarify this distinction.

Though hybridity has proved useful to those within postcolonial studies who wish to move away from the coloniser-colonised binary opposition and theorise identity both more positively and accurately, in terms of the understanding of Zahra and Azaro, hybridity is not the most helpful description because it has a connotation of being fixed, unlike liminality, which is often expressed through the metaphor of space. As Mireille Rosello points out, ‘a biological hybrid, or the crude definition we may have of what a biological hybrid is, could easily be accommodated by a barely modified acceptance of identities’ (1995: 6). In the present context, the significance of her assertion is that to call the postcolonial subject in general, or Azaro and Zahra in particular, hybrids, is not to take into account what is radically unique about them. A hybrid identity implies one that is a composite of two others, a crossbreed of coloniser and colonised primarily experienced by the colonised and not by the coloniser. To discuss instead liminality allows the understanding that the identity of the postcolonial subject is created from
multiple sources, while emphasising that the relation between the elements that make up the identity are not fixed and are continuing to be created in the present, rather than being 'biologically' determined before birth simply because the individual is born into a community that experienced colonisation.

To use liminality, with its emphasis on spatial positioning, rather than hybridity, which has been celebrated for its 'double vision', focuses the discussion on choice. The hybrid does not choose her double vision and only has limited control over what is seen. It is true that the liminar does not always choose to be on the margins of power. However, this thesis aims to show that Azaro and Zahra do have a choice about their liminal identities. When given the opportunity to move beyond ambiguity, they decide to remain in the volatile space of liminality, the most useful metaphor for their ever-shifting identities. It is for this reason that Azaro and Zahra will be analysed as liminars rather than as hybrids.

The use of liminality in this thesis is clarified by further discussion of ambiguity. This thesis aims to show that the power to subvert conventions in the liminal potential space is revalorised as a very positive aspect of liminality as manifested by Azaro and Zahra. The contention in this thesis is that Turner's description is applicable to both:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (1969: 95)

The spatial connotations of liminality are made clear by Turner in is use of the phrases 'neither here nor there' and 'betwixt and between the positions'. The ambiguity and indeterminacy of Azaro and Zahra are shown to be significantly more positive than negative in the texts and exemplify the 'possibility of creative growth and understanding' (Uprety 1999: 369). As will be shown, individual identity, rather than being reliant upon emotional, political or social stability, is defined and characterised by its fluidity for those characters who are able to celebrate the liminal or in-between state. As Uprety notes, 'The issue is one of crossing the borders, of constructing an identity at the moment of rupture, and of dissolving boundaries' (1999: 368).

For further amplification of this point, it is useful to introduce the theory of D.W. Winnicott, who uses a theory of spatial positioning to understand individual identity similar to that employed by van Gennep to examine rites of passage; Winnicott's version of van Gennep's 'well defined states' are what he calls 'inner or personal psychic reality' and 'the actual world in which the individual lives, which can be objectively perceived' (1971: 103). In between these
states is what he calls the ‘potential space’, a ‘highly variable factor (from individual to individual) whereas the other two locations—personal or psychic reality and the actual world—are relatively constant, one being biologically determined and the other being common property’ (103). The position of the potential space makes it liminal territory; this emphasised by the use of the word ‘potential’, something which is not necessarily guaranteed, but always possible. Therefore, though this space may initially be seen as fixed between the two other ‘poles’, it also fluctuates and shifts depending on the situation.

This concept of the ‘potential space’ will be used in Chapters II and III to illuminate the discussion of Zahra’s and Azaro’s identities. These boundaries of social convention and socially-imposed identity are dissolved and replaced with personally determined ones that are nevertheless ever-changing. These liminal characters illustrate the concept of identity proposed by Stuart Hall, which is

not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one. That is to say, directly contrary to what appears to be its settled semantic career, this concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already ‘the same’, identical to itself across time. [...] It accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourse, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (1996: 3-4)

Azaro and Zahra not only construct their identities out of what is available to them, but also out of what they themselves create by cultivating ambiguity, by continually slipping through the interstices of social classification, and by privileging the ‘transformative spaces’ in their identities, to use Kumkum Sangari’s evocative phrase to discuss individuals rather than texts; it will be seen that there is a clear connection between the depiction of Azaro and Zahra, characters who do not readily give up their meaning’ (Sangari 1995: 144), and the considerable transformative spaces in the texts, which refuse to provide a single cipher for their many codes. Both characters and narratives resist colonisation either by other members of their communities or by the reader. Therefore, in the face of this ‘resistance’ it is necessary to state the methodology to be employed in this thesis, as well as the form that the analysis of these two characters and four texts will take.

VI. METHODOLOGY AND PLAN

A brief look at the different traditions of Francophone and Anglophone scholarship will help to contextualise the methodology employed in this thesis; this discussion will then be
applied in a brief review of secondary criticism of Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s texts as a means then to situate this thesis within these debates.

It was suggested in the discussion of the rise of postcolonial studies that in the decades since political independence of former colonies, a greater divide has been created between Angolphone and Francophone postcolonial literary criticism. Indeed, the field of postcolonial studies itself is dominated by English-speaking critics looking primarily at English language texts, though there are some exceptions that will be discussed below. This division is not only one of language, but of approach. It is possible to divide the critical approaches within Anglophone and Francophone literary criticism very broadly by saying that the former emphasises politics, whereas the latter focuses on poetics.

As outlined in the discussion of the postcolonial-postmodern debate, one of the main areas of focus in postcolonial studies as opposed to postmodernism has been politics, the need to recognise and examine what McNeece calls the ‘serious political and social issues’ facing artists and regions that have experienced colonisation. Therefore, much of the English-language postcolonial theory has centred on historical, social and political realities in these countries. When postcolonial theory is applied to literary texts, it has tended to focus as or more on context as text. Such an approach, whilst ensuring that political and social complexities surrounding the production, consumption and study of postcolonial texts are not erased or minimised, also leads to a situation in which texts are read only in the light of their postcolonial message or in which literary texts are criticised if they do not seem to deal with these issues directly. This was seen in the earlier discussion of magical realism, a style that can confound the critic looking for an historical account of colonisation or the postcolonial condition.

There is an opposite trend within the criticism of Francophone literary texts, in which, as Belinda Jack notes, the term ‘postcolonial’ is not even particularly common. Analysis of Francophone texts by artists from former colonies has placed more emphasis on ‘poetics’ than politics. In other words, on text over context. This difference in focus may be related to the respective positions of French and English as world languages. English is currently dominant, whilst French is waning (and has been for some time) as the preferred language of diplomacy, culture and, particularly, technology. Jack notes that while there is ‘clear evidence of a new discipline’ of postcolonial studies within the American academy, there

is no comparable francophone academy within which a comparable francophone discipline might emerge. Although French centres for the study of francophone literatures have been established (the Centre d’études francophones at the Université de Paris XIII, most importantly), France’s relationship with the francophone world, in large part her former colonies, remains a complex one. (1996: 3)
The study of Francophone literature has been promoted partly as a means to encourage the use and study of the French language worldwide. Thus, a tension is created between the desire to expand the use of French and the desire to confront head-on the effects of colonisation. In the former case, remnants of the old French colonial policy of assimilation may be seen: the same techniques of textual analysis are applied to all French-language texts, with more focus on form and style than the historical, political and social context surrounding these texts. To use an example from criticism on Ben Jelloun’s work, texts are devoted to his style and language, such as the 1988 text *Tahar Ben Jelloun: stratégies d'écriture* and Bengt Novén’s 1996 text *Les mots et le corps: étude des procès d'écriture dans l'œuvre de Tahar Ben Jelloun*, rather than their postcolonial context.

A brief look at some of the critical approaches taken by Anglophone and Francophone critics to Ben Jelloun’s and Okti’s work will highlight the differences between them, while pointing out some instances of overlap. The best example of the difference between Anglophone and Francophone approaches to his work comes in the analysis of *ES*. Unsurprisingly, the two most common aspects of the novel to be analysed are gender and narrative structure, though gender has received much less attention in the French-language criticism. Critics such as Lisa Lowe have found in Zahra’s ‘transvestism’, being forced to act like a man and wear male clothing as a symbol of colonial domination. She reads Zahra’s ‘alternative transvestism’ when she is a female-male impersonator at the travelling fair as her strategy of resistance to this domination. Suzanne Gauch modifies and deepens Lowe’s analysis to conclude that the image of the body in the text is more complex than a simple binary opposition of male/female used to represent coloniser/colonised. French-language criticism of *ES* does not make a similar connection between the structures of patriarchy and those of colonisation.

The area in which there has been most agreement between English- and French-language criticism of *ES* is on the question of style. The text lends itself to stylistic analysis as, not only are there warring narrators, but the linear structure of the doors to shape the story is subverted by the circular nature of the storyteller’s tale and the actual circle in which he tells it. Here, too, however, there are differences in emphasis. Anglophone critics such as John Erickson have examined Ben Jelloun’s non-linear narrative structure as a strategy of resistance to colonisation or Western domination, whilst critics such as Abdellah Hammouti focus on the non-linear structure as a manifestation of the oral tradition in Maghrebi culture and suggest that generic (rather than overtly political) boundaries are being crossed. These two viewpoints are combined in Robert Elbaz’s book *L'assouvissement du désir narratif*, which looks in detail at Ben Jelloun’s narrative style with its reliance on oral tradition as an expression of the trauma of the
colonial past. The question of style will be discussed in the Conclusion and the position of this thesis presented in detail.

Nearly all the critical literature on Ben Okri has been in English and written within the Anglophone postcolonial domain. One exception is Xavier Garnier's article, 'L'Invisible dans The Famished Road de Ben Okri', which examines Okri's 'magical realist' techniques as a means to come closer to a reality that exists in the visible and invisible. Focus on Azaro's abiku status is prevalent in articles by critics such as John Hawley, Margaret Cesair-Thompson, Edna Aizenberg and Brenda Cooper. These critics focus on Azaro's abiku status as a symbol of his postcolonial condition. However, as Chapter III will show, this thesis goes farther than previous criticism in its emphasis Azaro's choice of the liminal space as opposed to a choice to end it.

The other area of critical enquiry, primarily dominated by the work of Ato Quayson who has written numerous articles and book chapters on Okri's texts, is orality. However, Quayson does not examine Okri's use of the techniques of oral storytelling as a strategy of resistance to colonial domination. In this, Quayson's approach is more similar to that of Francophone literary critics.

A definitive statement of the position of this thesis on issues of gender, magical realism, and orality would be premature in this Introduction. Rather, these positions will become clearer through the textual analysis to be undertaken in the following chapters, and amplified in the Conclusion to the thesis. However, in terms of the approach taken by this thesis and its relation both to Anglophone and Francophone literary criticism and criticism specific to Ben Jelloun and Okri, it is important to state here the general methodology that will be employed in this thesis and outline its potential benefits and risks.

Consistent with the liminal nature of the protagonists of the primary texts, the approach taken here will be one that is based on a combination of Francophone and Anglophone techniques, with emphasis on the former. Because Azaro and Zahra and the narratives of their lives are deliberately enigmatic and ambiguous, the study of the poetics of these texts is necessary. Indeed, it is my contention that this is the only way to understand these texts fully, and to avoid 'colonising' them in the way that outlined earlier in reference to Snead's arguments. Detailed reading, comparison and analysis are vital to a full understanding of the complexities of these four texts; when these techniques are used, it will possible by the end of the thesis to reassess Ben Jelloun's and Okri's stance on the postcolonial/postmodern debate raised in this Introduction, and situate them more fully within the politics of the postcolonial.

It is through comparing texts from different literary and cultural backgrounds that it is possible to come to new conclusions about postcolonial identity. However, this approach is a relatively new one. Though comparative literature has had the potential to grow with the explosion of postcolonial studies, there is currently relatively little cross-language comparison of
postcolonial literatures. This thesis seeks to begin the process of comparing postcolonial literatures across languages and cultures. The considerable potential in this research is that it will allow comparative analysis of postcolonial literatures that in some way circumvents the former centre—the Western literary canon. However, with the amazing potential of this comparative approach to postcolonial literature come potential pitfalls.

Claudio Guillén usefully outlines some of the greatest problem facing the comparatist, whose situation is neither simple nor comfortable. Different and often opposing aims attract and lure him, although the options are reduced to four primary ones; first, the gap between an artistic inclination (the enjoyment of literature as art) and a social preoccupation (the work as an act, a response to the imperfections and deficiencies of the historical environs of man); second, the difference between the practical (the interpretation of particular texts) and the theoretical (the explanation, explicit or not, or certain premises and of a significant order); third, the distinction between the individual (the single work, the unmistakable writer, the originality that cultivated and written literature makes possible) and the system (the whole, the genre, the historical configuration, the generational movement, the inertia of writing); and, finally, the tension between the local and the universal that confronts comparatists in particular. (1993:6)

Guillén's 'aims' demonstrate the difficulties of balancing poetics and politics. This balancing act is particularly sensitive in the comparative study of postcolonial texts, as there is a danger of simply ignoring the differences between these texts and those written by artists who have not experienced colonisation. In addition, as indicated earlier in the thesis, the political, social and cultural histories of Morocco and Nigeria are vastly different. These histories can provide significant clues to the meaning of the texts. And yet, it would be unfortunate to restrict these works of art to the context in which they were written, as their meaning often goes far beyond the local. Thus, the comparatist must balance the demands of accuracy by giving relevant details about historical and cultural issues and those of poetics, which delves deeply into the primary texts in order to reveal underlying levels of comparison that might not be obvious if historical detail were the main focus. It is this balance that this thesis seeks to achieve through textual analysis as a means to contextual understanding.

Therefore, now that the context and major theoretical concepts have been defined and their relevance to the four texts explained, it is possible to begin work on the primary texts in order to reach conclusions about the connection between liminality and identity. Chapter I will examine Zahra's and Azaro's early lives in order to establish them as liminal beings from birth. The rites of passage of childhood will be analysed in order to show that these characters are
liminal both in the ritually-induced sense relating to van Gennep’s theory of rites of passage *and* in the social sense formulated by Turner. The focus of Chapter II will be gender and sex roles and Zahra’s understanding of her identity, whilst Chapter III will analyse Azaro’s identity in terms of his position wavering between spirit and human identity. The Conclusion will examine the narrative strategies employed by the authors to recount the tales of these protagonists, and discuss the position of the reader as a result of it.
CHAPTER I: CHILDHOOD AND LIMINALITY

The exploration of identity and liminality within a postcolonial context to be undertaken in this thesis is best begun by thorough analysis of Azaro’s and Zahra’s lives from birth. Azaro and Zahra are the natural focus for this thesis both as the protagonists of the texts, and as the characters whose experience of liminality is unique. By such examination throughout the thesis, it will be possible to re-evaluate the classification of these texts within the genre of the Bildungsroman and gain fuller understanding of the changing domain of postcolonial studies.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish Azaro and Zahra as liminal from birth, and demonstrate that this liminality gives them the ability to subvert Law and convention through their very existence, and through their own choices in childhood. The births of these liminal characters will also be shown to have particular importance because their stories are shown to be symbolic of the births of their respective nations. Azaro’s and Zahra’s liminality will be understood on two levels. The first relates to liminality within rites of passage. As discussed in the Introduction, van Gennep divides the rite of passage into the ‘rites of separation from a previous world [...] those executed during the transitional stage [...] and the ceremonies of incorporation’ (1960: 21). In physical terms, the separation stage is complete when the child has left the mother’s body. However, the incorporation into the human world is not completed until well after the child’s birth; the rites of passage of Zahra’s and Azaro’s early infancies are designed to incorporate the ‘little strangers’ into the human world. These early rituals—naming, the forty-day ceremony and circumcision—act to confirm the children’s place in the world, protect them from harm, and announce their social status. It will be shown that both Azaro and Zahra remain in the liminal stage of these rites of passage, and that this has significant effects both on their own identities, and their communities' understanding of them.

The second part of the chapter, which will discuss later childhood, will shift its focus to analysis of the reasons for these rites of passage, and the role of the parents. Such discussion of the parents is vital to an understanding of the ways that Zahra and Azaro may be seen to subvert convention and social law. The groundwork for this discussion of parental influence will be laid within the discussion of the early rites of passage by demonstrating that parents in the texts use ritual and rites of passage to make a statement to their communities about their children. The ceremonies discussed in this chapter are not instigated by the child: they are imposed by the parents and necessitated by society. As such, a great deal of their interest to an examination of Azaro’s and Zahra’s identities lies in the parents’ hopes or expectations of their

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1Though there are other characters who might fit some of the criteria for liminality, they will not be classed as liminals for the purposes of this thesis, primarily because they are used in the texts to illuminate the Azaro’s or Zahra’s liminality rather than to provide insight into the subject in their own right. Two such characters are the Consul in the French texts and the blind old man in the English ones: they will be examined in Chapter II and III.
children manifested in their treatment of their offspring at key stages in their lives. In this way, the childhood rites of passage described in the texts begin the process of 'marking and maturing' (Nyatetu-Waigwa 1996: 1) these protagonists, which corresponds to the definition of the Bildungsroman discussed in the Introduction. However, it shall be seen that even in this initial period of their lives, Zahra and Azaro are children who consistently subvert parental and societal expectations. Thus, exploration of the tension between the imagined child and the real one is vital to an understanding of the personal approaches to identity taken by Zahra and Azaro later in life and examined in Chapters II and III.

It should be noted that the traditional rituals of infancy are described in greater detail in the French texts than in the English ones. A possible reason for the more thorough description of childhood rituals in ES and NS is that the obfuscation of Zahra's true sex means that any rituals must be celebrated with conspicuous pageantry, over and above the fact that there are traditionally more rituals marking the lives of male children than there are for female children in Muslim culture (Platt 1988: 275); Zahra's father is aware of his brothers' dismay at the arrival of a boy and wishes to emphasise at every possible juncture the masculinity of his child. This kind of display is impossible for Azaro's parents because they are poor; it is also not as important to the family's social position. Hadj Ahmed's entire fortune and reputation depend on the successful masquerade of Zahra as a boy, which is not the case for Azaro's parents. Though the public rituals described in FR and SE do obliquely relate to Azaro's abiku status, the members of his community choose to ignore it by refusing to acknowledge any evidence of it.

Before examining the ways in which Azaro and Zahra are unique even among children, it is important to show that all children, and particularly newborns, may be seen to be liminal.

1. CHILDHOOD RITES OF PASSAGE

A. BIRTH: THE LIMINAL NEWBORN

Birth provides a very clear example of Arnold van Gennep's schema of thresholds to describe transition in human life, as the mouth of the womb represents a physical gateway into the human world, which may be considered the first symbolic threshold that the child must cross. This is explicitly the case in ES, as the first 'door' of Zahra's life is the 'porte du jeudi [qui] occupe dans le livre la place primordiale de l'entrée. L'entrée et l'arrivée. L'entrée et la naissance' (17). Azaro's birth is similarly linked to passage. He says, 'How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea' (FR 5). A new arrival to the community in the form of an infant is a significant event; in fact, the move from the womb to respectively, particularly in terms of a connection between blindness and liminality and the deeper understanding they
the world is not without its risks to the infant and mother, as well as the community at large, which may be significantly affected by the entry of a new member to their ranks. Azaro notes the risk to himself by saying that the passage through the threshold into the human world at his birth is marked by ‘flames and the sea’ (6). It is important to understand the potential threat posed by the newborn in order to demonstrate the ways in which childhood ritual is used both to protect the child from harm, and to contain the risks an unknown individual may present to the community. These risks or dangers stem from the fact the newborn is radically other; it is free of the usual markers that allow members of the community to identify and understand him or her, including character traits and title or status within the community because these only become apparent or are conferred over time. In other words newborns are strangers. An exchange between Azaro and Dad in *SE* highlights this point:

‘That baby isn’t human,’ I said.

‘All babies are strange,’ dad replied. (54)

This dialogue is interesting in several ways: Azaro is able to recognise that the baby is not human because he himself is not human; Dad does not reject this notion out of hand, but rather insists upon the strangeness of all infants, a strangeness that is explicitly linked by Azaro’s remark to the non-human. Babies are not yet recognised or recognisable as members of their community. A Yoruba diviner quoted by Margaret Drewal, an anthropologist who has done extensive field research in Nigeria, explains the infant’s ambiguous status by saying that the child has not been used to the world, as we the elders. So he has no knowledge of the world. He has not had much contact with people. His dealings have been with those in heaven. He has just arrived, so he is still more heavenly than worldly. We have to perform his own rituals very anciently, very nearly heavenly. He is a new man. Nobody knows him […] Until we know what the child is doing here, we can’t treat him like ourselves. (1992: 52)

The child is of ‘ourselves’ because he has come from the mother’s body and belongs to her and her community. And yet he is not considered to be fully part of the human world: the child is in a liminal state, not quite spirit, not yet human. Indeed, Drewal states of the Yoruba that there is ‘the assumption that […] the spirit of the newborn babe is still betwixt and between the otherworld and earth. Its spirit has just left its place in heaven. It is still in the process of coming’ (51). Victor Turner, too, notes that preadolescent children sometimes ‘mediate
between the dead and the living’ because ‘they are not long from the womb’ (1969: 172). The young Azaro is a perfect example of this: neither fully human nor fully spirit, he has the necessary qualifications to mediate between the living and the dead, which he does. Azaro says that in early childhood he ‘often found myself oscillating between both worlds’ (FR 8). This ‘oscillation’ will be shown to be characteristic of Azaro’s identity throughout his life. In his early life, he ‘could read people’s minds. I could foretell their futures’ (9). He saves his mother from being knocked down by a lorry because he heeds a voice telling him to cross the road, and takes his mother with him (9). These extraordinary powers contribute to the notion of the child as a stranger; even Azaro’s mother is not able fully to comprehend her own child.

Despite the potential benefit to the community from such powers, strangers pose a problem because the community is able to predict neither their actions nor the effect their presence will have on them. Van Gennep writes that toward the infant, the Rahuna of Morocco take a ‘defensive attitude like one the group assumes toward a stranger’ and that in order to define and identify the child, he ‘must first be separated from his previous environment, which may simply be his mother’ (1960: 53). For Azaro, this ‘previous environment’ is much more than his mother: it is the entire spirit world, from which it is difficult to separate him, as shall be seen throughout this chapter and in Chapter III, though all newborns may be seen to be implicated in this ‘strangeness’, simply by virtue of being new to the community.

Once the separation from the ‘previous environment’ is (considered to be) effected, the community may begin the process of incorporating the child fully into the human world, a process which itself is made up of stages. It is interesting to note that the newborn does not typically undergo the first incorporation rituals until after a period of seven or forty days has passed. One reason for this is that an infant’s life is at its most precarious in the first days after birth. In North African Muslim society, the period before the fortieth day of life ‘is considered an extremely dangerous period when the infant could easily be snatched away by illness or malevolent forces’ (Platt 1988: 274), whilst Margaret Drewal notes that among the Yoruba population of Nigeria ‘there is an extremely high infant mortality rate, particularly during the first three months after birth’ (1992: 51). Indeed, as noted in the Introduction, the phenomenon of the abiku, the child ‘born to die’, is one way of accounting for a high mortality rate amongst this group. Thus, the newborn’s position of being ‘betwixt and between’ is prolonged beyond the first separation from the mother. On the one hand, if the infant is not going to live, social incorporation would be a waste of time and indeed contrary to the society’s beliefs about what constitutes one of themselves. On the other hand, the waiting period allows both child and community to become accustomed to one another in order to increase the chances that the

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2It should be noted that, whilst in FR both ‘Dad’ and ‘Mum’ are treated as proper names, with a capitalised first letter, this convention is not continued in SE, in which neither parent’s name is capitalised. I use the style of FR, which seems to me to be more accurate, but respect the style of SE in quotations.
name given in the first post-birth ritual of childhood, naming, is appropriate. However, for both Zahra and Azaro, the fitness of their names is extremely dubious.

B. NAMING

The ceremony of naming represents Azaro’s and Zahra’s initial incorporation into the human world and the social structure into which they are born. Van Gennep outlines the implications of naming for the child and society: ‘When a child is named, he is both individualized and incorporated into society. He may be brought into the society at large, in which case there is a general celebration involving the whole village’ (1960: 62). One would expect from this that in the texts naming would supply the rest of the community with a way to understand Zahra’s and Azaro’s place within the group, and provide the reader of their stories a sense of who the characters are, as well as give Zahra and Azaro a way of identifying herself or himself. In this way, it may be seen that there are multiple levels to the assessment of identity. Though the understanding of all three of these groups—community within the texts, reader(s) and individual—may share some similarities, it is important to remember that this is not necessarily the case. The close reading of Azaro’s and Zahra’s lives in the main chapters will refer to these differences of identification in order to discuss the reader’s position in detail in the Conclusion. However, this tool of identification (the name) is not necessarily fixed. Van Gennep suggests that to give the individual a series of names over time may help further delimit his or her identity as he or she becomes more understood by his or her community. Van Gennep observes, ‘Often [the child] receives a vague name, then a known personal name, then a secret personal name, a family name, a clan name, the name of a secret society, and so forth’ (62). Indeed, FR and SE depict a society in which multiple names for one person are common. On one occasion after he has been brought back from the world of the spirits Azaro notes, ‘During that period names were a mystery to me and I pronounced their different nicknames or public names over and over again as if for the first time’ (FR 342), indicating that community members also have family names, secret names, etc. in addition to the name given to them as infants. Thus, there is recognition in this society that naming is a form of understanding the individual; names will be accumulated as the individual ‘earns’ them. This, in itself, suggests acceptance in Azaro’s community of multiple and possibly conflicting identities or names within the same individual. However, such acceptance does not mean that Azaro (or Zahra) are not unusual within their societies.

\[1\] However, multiple names may lead to conflict of identity for the individual. One such example is Dad, a character who struggles to fulfil his expectations of the patriarch represented by the title ‘Dad’ but who also sees himself engaging in the triumphant struggle of a young hero, symbolised in his nickname ‘Black Tyger’. An examination of the conflict between these two names is outwith the scope of this thesis, but for further analysis see my article ‘Wait ‘till Your Father Gets Home, Paternity, Archetype and Authority in Four Novels by Ben Okri and Tahar Ben Jelloun’. Authority: Critical Essays in World Literature. Tritium 32 (2000): 73-86, in which the two names are shown to epitomize Dad’s (unconscious) identity crisis.
For Azaro and Zahra, in contrast to their peers, there is no progressive refinement of an understanding of their identities, either through the granting of one, true name, or an accumulation of names to represent multiple character traits or social roles. This emphasises their ambiguity; neither community members nor the reader can categorise them with ease. Though Zahra’s and Azaro’s naming ceremonies are designed to incorporate and individualise them within their communities, this purpose is subverted by the enigmatic nature of its subjects. This is partly manifested in the fact that for both the name by which she or he is commonly known is the second, if not the third name given.

Zahra possesses two names, Ahmed and Zahra, both of which she is given twice. Three of these namings occur in ES: Zahra is named ‘Ahmed’ by the storyteller recounting her tale in ES and by Hadj Ahmed in the traditional naming ceremony early in her infancy. She is given the name Zahra by the mother of the circus-owner who drafts her into becoming a male-female impersonator in ES, as will be seen in Chapter II. She is also named Zahra in NS by Hadj Ahmed, who renames her on his deathbed. It will be demonstrated that neither of these names is wholly satisfactory, because each name is used by its giver to make a public statement about Zahra’s male or female identity, neither of which is ultimately appropriate. Zahra’s experience with the travelling circus, which will be examined in Chapter II, will be shown to problematise this situation further.

The inappropriateness of the name ‘Ahmed’, and of the naming ritual, is initially expressed on a textual level: the storyteller first names the character more than ten pages before the baptism by the father is mentioned. The storyteller does not say that the family decided to name him Ahmed but, ‘Appelons-le Ahmed’ (ES 17). This makes the naming of this child the product of a kind of group consensus proposed by the storyteller, one that is removed both from the family group and Zahra’s actual community. She is named from the outside, by the teller of her tale, who is just as much a creator of her as her father and indeed more so, as he is the first to do it. This is the first suggestion to the reader that the ‘truth’ of the story is suspect. Though for Hadj Ahmed the significance of naming the child ‘Ahmed’ is enormous, the storyteller adopts a much more cavalier attitude, saying ‘qu’importe le nom’ (17). The storyteller recognises that the name cannot accurately describe or circumscribe this child. His attitude indicates a tentativeness to pin down this child’s identity with a definitive name. Thus, from the first pages of the text, Zahra’s identity is characterised by ambiguity, an ambiguity only enhanced by the existence of her female name.

The only traditional naming ritual of the four ‘baptisms’ she undergoes is the one for ‘Ahmed’. This ceremony is turned into a spectacle of public interest, like every significant moment of Zahra’s life that could confirm her maleness: ‘La fête du baptême fut grandiose. Un boeuf égorgé pour donner le nom: Mohammed Ahmed, fils de Hadj Ahmed. On pria derrière le grand fiqih et mufti de la ville. Des plats de nourriture furent distribués aux pauvres’ (29-30).
When compared to the ‘chèvre maigre’ (19) sacrificed for the previous daughters with hastily muttered prayers, the distinction is marked. In addition, the distribution of food to the poor makes of Zahra’s baptism a public event, one which brings benefits to those outside the family circle.

Not only is there ‘generally more ritual recognition of a male birth than of a female birth’ (Platt 1988: 275) in North African Muslim society, but public celebration strongly emphasises the masculinity of the child because only males are allowed free reign in the public sphere. Fatima Mernissi discusses the importance of the division of public and private space in *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*. She observes that ‘Strict space boundaries divide Moroccan society into two sub-universes: the universe of men, the *Umma* universe of religion and power; and the universe of women, the domestic universe of sexuality and the family’ (1975: 81). By making the baptism a public and religious event through prayer and distribution of food to the poor, Hadj Ahmed very effectively asserts ‘Ahmed’s’ place within the male sphere, thereby stressing the ‘spatial division according to sex’ that Mernissi argues ‘reflects the division between those who hold authority and those who do not’ (81).

Hadj Ahmed clearly wants to assert from as early as possible that Zahra is one of those who holds authority, and he begins to do so through the grand baptism ceremony. Another way he attempts this is by the announcement he places in the national newspaper. Such a move is absolutely unprecedented and ‘fit beaucoup jaser. On n’avait pas l’habitude d’étaler ainsi publiquement sa vie privée’ (30). This breach of the public/private divide signals Hadj Ahmed’s obsession with having a son and announces that Zahra’s identity is itself divided into public and private manifestations that are disturbingly contradictory: the entire baptism ritual is illustrative of the ways in which Zahra’s identity is a constant transgression of tradition and convention, long before she is old enough to control or even be aware of it.

The actual success of this baptism is deeply suspect on several levels, though, in the eyes of the rest of the community, the bid to incorporate this ‘boy’ into society appears fulfilled. First and foremost, of course, Zahra is not a boy: the male name is not an accurate representation of her. Rather, it is an accurate representation of her father’s overwhelming and obsessive desire to have a son. He desires her to become an extension and continuation of his own identity, not an autonomous individual (male or female). The first name, ‘Mohammed’ is that of the Prophet, the leader of Islam, thus making the child part of the *Umma* community.

The second, ‘Ahmed’, is not only one of the most common names in Muslim communities, but her father’s own name, which further emphasises Hadj Ahmed’s intention of assuring ‘Ahmed’s’ successful assimilation into male Muslim society, as he himself has been assimilated

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4She defines *Umma* as ‘a sophisticated ideological group based on religious beliefs’ (xiv).

5This is not the only time that Hadj Ahmed defies convention in his behaviour relating toward his ‘son’. In *N* he explains to Zahra that his pride in his son was so great that he took care of her himself, behaviour well outside the traditional role of husband or father. He says, ‘j’appris à m’occuper d’un enfant. Cela ne se fait pas chez nous’ (28).
by assuming the roles of head of the family and faithful Muslim, signified by the title ‘Hadj’ (one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca or Medina). Moreover, the fact that he gives the child his own name publicly proclaims that the ‘boy’s’ role is to be the heir and image of ‘his’ father. To bestow the name ‘Ahmed’ is one way to confine Zahra to the role he has chosen for her. Yet this desire can never be satisfied because Zahra is at no point an authentic image of her father; thus the incorporation and individualisation that van Gennep suggests are the purposes of naming are both undermined. In addition, as the first naming of Zahra is effected by the storyteller, who explicitly emphasises his power over the story, Hadj Ahmed’s traditional naming of his ‘son’ is radically subverted; it is not certain if this naming ‘actually’ occurs or if it is simply an invention of the storyteller’s, the one with the true power. Furthermore, the naming ceremony is the first example of the tension between parental desire and the reality presented by the child, which may be seen throughout Zahra’s childhood.

This tension seems to be finally resolved in NS, in which the name ‘Zahra’ is given by Hadj Ahmed. On his deathbed, fear of retribution from the angels sent by God to earth on the Sacred Night drives him to attempt to ‘mettre de l’ordre’ (23) in his life by telling Zahra his side of her story, accepting her true sex and begging her forgiveness. Hadj Ahmed recognises his failure to name her appropriately the first time, and though the words come from his mouth, he claims that ‘La Nuit du Destin te nomme Zahra’ (32). And yet, like ‘Ahmed’, ‘Zahra’ is also the product of parental and, indeed, paternal, desire; it also imposes a specific identity, though there is some ambiguity about this in the texts. The name ‘Zahra’ may be seen as the female counterpart to Mohammed Ahmed, representative of the proper role of women within Muslim society. This is because the Prophet’s beloved daughter’s name is ‘Fatima Zohra’ (Legey 1935: 225). And yet, Hadj Ahmed says it means ‘fleur des fleurs, grâce, enfant de l’éternité, tu es le temps qui se maintient dans le versant du silence... sur le sommet du feu... parmi les arbres... sur le visage du ciel qui descend...’ (32). Therefore, though the name Zahra suggests the adoption of a conventional Muslim female role, the meaning Hadj Ahmed gives to the name has a less clear connotation, first because he tells her that his approaching death has made him realise that her ‘destin serait meilleur que celui de toutes les femmes de ce pays’ (32), and second because, with the description of Zahra as the ‘enfant de l’éternité’, it seems that Zahra is invited or expected to be a kind of pyer aeternus destined always to remain undeveloped and, despite the feminine name, sexless. This scene reveals the complexities inherent in the texts with regard to female sexuality that will be carefully examined in Chapter II. It also demonstrates that all attempts to name and thereby classify this character are unsuccessful; despite his recognition of her gender, Hadj Ahmed is still unable to see Zahra as a self-determined individual. Moreover, all of Zahra’s naming rituals ultimately fail to incorporate her
into an appropriate role in society, leaving her liminality unaltered. As a result, in *NS* Zahra begins a journey to make a name for herself elsewhere, which will be discussed in Chapter II.

The failure of attempts to name Azaro are equally problematic in their relation to the capacity of names to identify these liminal characters. ‘Azaro’ is not the first forename to be given to this child, a fact the reader only discovers by default when the change to Azaro is mentioned. The original first name, presumably given by his parents, is unstated in the texts: the reader is not privy to this name and the meaning it could have had to the community. However, a near-death experience in *FR* renders it inappropriate. Azaro’s spirit companions, disgusted with his lack of determination to rejoin them in death, lure him ‘with sweet songs toward a gutter’ (8). The gutter is filled with unclean water that, despite his escape, makes him ill. Azaro is unaware of the craftiness of his companions in forcing him to spend so much time in the spirit world during his illness, begging them to allow him to stay in the human world: ‘It was only much later, when I tried to get back into my body and couldn’t that I realised they had managed to shut me out of my life’ (8). They attempt to force Azaro to relinquish his identity as this particular human incarnation to these particular parents, but he does not want this: ‘I cried for a long time into the silver void till our great king interceded for me and reopened the gates of my body’ (8). The silver void, clearly a liminal space between the two worlds, is a dreadful place for Azaro in this instance because he has not chosen to go there, and is prevented from his oscillation between the spirit and human worlds by being trapped in it. His cries are heeded, however, and he is restored to human life, only to find that ‘I had lingered between not dying and not living for two weeks’ (8). This restoration acts as a rebirth, thus necessitating a new name. Unlike other members of the community, there is not an accumulation of names for Azaro; rather, the inappropriate names must be totally rejected and effaced from memory, the reader not even allowed to know what the ‘original’ name was.

The failure of his first forename to incorporate him adequately and safely into the community is clearly demonstrated by his near-death experience and his parents’ reaction to his return to the land of the living: ‘because of my miraculous recovery they named me a second time and threw a party which they couldn’t afford’ (8). As in Zahra’s case, there is a public feasting of this important event, despite Azaro’s parents’ poverty. The celebration shared by the whole compound is a crucial way that the naming ceremony allows Azaro to be ‘individualized and incorporated’ into his community. Despite the party, the second name he is given is also not the one by which he is known—it, too, is inappropriate (or too appropriate, perhaps): ‘They named me Lazaro. But as I became the subject of much jest, and as many were uneasy with the connection between Lazaro and Lazarus, Mum shortened my name to Azaro’ (8). Unlike the name ‘Ahmed’, which is accepted without incident by the community in *ES*, the fact that the Prophet’s daughter is called ‘Fatima Zahra’ makes the proliferation of characters in the texts called Fatima or Fatouma all the more evocative, as these women may all be read as other versions of Zahra, as shall be seen
there is public rejection of the name ‘Lazaro’. This is an early example of the ways in which his community conspires to remain ignorant of Azaro’s true spirit identity, a conspiracy later shared by his parents. Once Mum has given him the nickname Azaro, the community settles down and accepts him.7

However, despite the community’s quietened unease, there is yet another name used to describe Azaro, which is even more disconcerting than Lazaro: the herbalist consulted by Mum and Dad ‘was the first to call me by that name which spreads horror amongst mothers’ (8). The name ‘abiku’ is not specified here; the reader is left to remember it from its appearance on page four, further emphasising the community’s fear of the unspeakable abiku and his close connection to the spirit world. His parents do nothing about the herbalist’s revelation and, with few exceptions, act as if Azaro is a normal boy. Only when he comes to grief in his wanderings do they refer to his status, usually indirectly.

There is an interesting contrast between the source of the failure of ‘Ahmed’ and ‘Lazaro’ to name the protagonists accurately. ‘Ahmed’ fails because it does not correspond to reality; Zahra is biologically female. Conversely, ‘Lazaro’ fails because both it and ‘abiku’ come too close to revealing his true identity, which his community is not willing to accept. Azaro’s parents buckle under the weight of public opinion and remove the first letter of the name, and with it its symbolism of a life lost and regained. Thus this examination of the naming rituals has revealed that Zahra’s lack of conformity to her name is unrecognised by her community, whilst Azaro’s does receive partial recognition. This recognition is not complete due to the community’s wilful blindness to Azaro’s spirit world connections manifested in their laughter and discomfort with the name Tazaro’.

Once these children are known to their communities by an accepted name, further incorporation rituals occur. The second significant set of rituals for Zahra and Azaro represents the definitive end of their period as strangers in the eyes of their communities, though this change in perception is misplaced. These rituals make Zahra and Azaro a full part of their communities, in particular, to the women in whose company they spend most of their early lives. However, contrary to what would happen with ‘normal’ children, Zahra’s and Azaro’s liminality, first manifested in the failure of their names to reflect their true identities, increases rather than decreases with time.

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7As Chapter III will show, Azaro’s community has a habit of wilful ignorance further manifested in their failure to bury Ade’s father in SE.
CHAPTER I: CHILDHOOD AND LIMINALITY

C. LA CÉRÉMONIE DU COIFFEUR

Zahra's entry into the community feasted at her naming ceremony is emphasised to an even greater extent in the 'cérémonie du coiffeur' or forty-day ceremony. Once forty days have passed, the named child's place in the human world is considered to be safe enough to venture greater celebrations. In North African Muslim culture, the forty-day ceremony is a kind of social 'coming out' party of the infant. It is very often elaborate for a male baby, including his first haircut, first pair of trousers and his first sitting up in a chair.

There are many references to his being a little man and to the upcoming circumcision ceremony for which there is no female equivalent. (Platt 1988: 276)

Just as the naming ceremony for 'Ahmed' is grand, Zahra's forty-day ceremony 'dura deux journées. On coupa les cheveux d'Ahmed, on lui maquilla les yeux avec du khôl. On l'installa sur un cheval en bois après lui avoir passé une djellaba blanche et couvert la tête d'un fez rouge' (ES 31). Her hair is cut, which prefigures the forthcoming circumcision and begins the child's transformation from child to adult in terms of social role. The name of the ceremony helps to signify this: 'la cérémonie du coiffeur' refers not to the haircut, but to the one who cuts the hair, the man who regulates masculinity and confers upon the boy into its accoutrements. The wearing of the fez and the placement on the wooden horse represent the child's future adoption of the male role. Once Zahra is 'appropriately' dressed,

La mère l'emmène ensuite visiter le saint de la ville. Elle le mit sur son dos et tourna sept fois autour du tombeau en priant le saint d'intéceder auprès de Dieu pour qu'Ahmed soit protégé du mauvais œil, de la maladie et de la jalousie des curieux. (31)

There is a combination of purposes for the ceremony at the saint's tomb because the mother begs protection from magical intervention (the evil eye), physical factors (illness) and human weakness (jealousy). As Françoise Legey states in *Folklore in Morocco*, after this ceremony has been performed, in the eyes of the community, 'the maximum amount of protection for the infant has been assured' (1935: 153). The protection ritual is the domain of the mother and the other women of the community, as the infant is considered to belong with the mother until after circumcision. However, foreshadowing Zahra's eager acceptance of her male role in later childhood and adolescence is her infantile reaction to the women of her community whose

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8The celebration corresponds exactly to Katherine Platt's and Françoise Legey's description of what is known as the forty-day ceremony, therefore, while I have kept the title 'la cérémonie du coiffeur' because of its symbolism, it will be treated as the same as the forty-day ceremony.

9Like van Gennep's, Françoise Legey's observations were published in the early twentieth century, making careful examination of her account and its potential biases necessary. She is used in this thesis because her observations of Moroccan Muslim culture corroborate the descriptions given in *ES* and *NS* by Ben Jelloun, and also Katherine Platt's findings from 1988.
attention and expectations seem to be rejected by the child’s response: ‘L’enfant pleurait dans cette foule de femmes’ (ES 31).

By contrast, Azaro speaks warmly of the women who welcome him into their fold. Though his naming ceremony has begun to incorporate him into the human world, Azaro’s ties to the spirit world are still strong and even his mother’s influence cannot break them. Though he has finally been named to the satisfaction of the community, he is still not fully incorporated into it or, indeed, the human world: he is always prey to the malevolent spirits from which Zahra is apparently protected at her forty-day ceremony. Nevertheless, whilst still a young boy, Azaro does undergo an experience with significant parallels to the forty-day ceremony: his mother ultimately protects him from spirits, physical harm and human malevolence.

The imagery used in the scene clearly evokes territorial passage and separation, inviting its interpretation both as a rite of passage and an equivalent to Zahra’s forty-day ceremony. A riot breaks out in the compound and Azaro passes through a type of threshold when a ‘caterwauling mass of people came pounding towards us. They ran right between us. They separated me from my mother’ (FR 11). Like the ‘flames and the sea’ (6) surrounding the threshold into the human world, this particular threshold into a world without his mother is also characterised by fire and driving rain. Azaro is abducted by women ‘smelling of bitter herbs’ who ‘suddenly appeared out of the darkness’ (11). He is taken to a mysterious island and treated as a neophyte, separated from others and dressed in white, just as Zahra is dressed in a white djellaba during her forty-day ceremony. Azaro’s treatment on the island is seductively generous:

With a gentleness that surprised me, they led me to a lovely house and laid out many choice dishes before me. When I had finished they dressed me in a spotless robe of material so soft and white that I felt I had been wrapped in a cloud. They touched me tenderly and left the room. (13)

However, a voice suggests that Azaro is in danger and he escapes with a woman who has apparently lost her son. He leaves the woman behind once they reach the shore and wanders the city. Eventually, he is taken to the home of a police officer and his wife.

In this second part of Azaro’s ordeal, he is ‘looked after’ by the police officer and his wife, presumably until his parents are located. However, the house is haunted by ‘ghosts and spirits [...] because the officer had somehow been responsible for their deaths’ (26). The ‘saddest ghost in the house’ (25) is their dead son. Just as Zahra’s mother correlates three types of danger in the protection ritual for her child, in the police officer’s house, Azaro faces danger from magical, physical and human sources. The peril to him is unspecified but ominous. When he realises this, he ‘summoned up the image of my mother. When I saw her very clearly, I spoke to her, begging her to come and save me’ (24). Azaro’s certainty ‘that she had heard me’
(24) is justified, because on another stormy night Mum rescues him and brings him to the family's new compound. Later Azaro finds out that Mum has gone to a herbalist for advice and discovered how to save her son from evil spirits, thereby finally allowing him to be reunited with his mother.

This entire experience is laden with images of separations between mothers and sons: Azaro is abducted by women and meets a woman who has lost her son; a voice tells him that 'the goddess hasn’t found a child to give birth to' (14) and warns him that he is in danger; the policeman and his wife have also lost their son—to death. Thus, the reunion with his mother takes on added significance. It also involves the other women in the community who surround Azaro after he returns from being 'lost'. The whole community rejoices at the return of Azaro and attributes a symbolic importance to it:

The women touched me and looked at me as if I were a wonderful thing that had fallen from the sky. They fondled my hair, rubbed my skin, and felt my bones as if, in being lost and found, I belonged to all of them. I had brought with me a new hope. (28)

As with Zahra's forty-day ceremony, in which her mother is responsible for her protection from evil, in this situation it is Azaro's mother who is the instigator of his salvation. Both are also events that unite the women in the community, who all take on a protective, nurturing role toward 'their' child. This particular incorporation into Azaro's community is much more successful than his naming; free from ill-natured jests because the mystery of his return is celebrated rather than feared, it renders him less of a stranger in his community because he now 'belonged to all of them'. Azaro becomes the child of the compound, representative of their hopes for the future, and perhaps more, as will be seen at the end of this chapter.

However, though in this instance Azaro and his mother are reunited, Azaro's later separation from Mum is foreshadowed in this first separation. For both Azaro and Zahra, once the physical dependency of early childhood has passed, the fathers will begin to take on a larger role in their lives.

These second major rite of passage for Azaro and Zahra are largely successful: as a result of them, they are firmly established as members of their communities. The children's liminality is not eliminated, however. Some element of these early rituals has failed adequately to incorporate them into their communities or separate them from another world. Zahra’s real identity is concealed by a false name whereas, because of his strong connections to his spirit companions, Azaro is more like a being that has 'fallen from the sky' than the women of the compound fully understand: they are not willing to admit just the kind of person they have welcomed into their ranks.

Once Azaro and Zahra are named and accepted (and protected) members of their communities, further analysis of their places within them is required. Later childhood rituals
such as circumcision are designed to begin their transition process from the generic, supposedly sexless category of ‘children’ to gender-specific roles and expectations of behaviour. For both the spirit and counterfeit male child, parental expectation becomes increasingly more important to the way they are perceived and evaluated as their social roles become more fixed. However, the parents deliberately ignore the realities their children present.

D. CIRCUMCISION

The third rite of passage to be examined, circumcision, is pivotal because it begins the incorporation of Azaro and Zahra into a gender-specific role, though they still have interaction with the feminine world of the mother. Zahra’s circumcision ceremony occurs a year or two after the forty-day ceremony and acts as a separation from the mother and the first incorporation into the ‘brouillard masculin’. This ceremony is the most important for Hadj Ahmed in his quest to pass Zahra off as a boy. Circumcision marks a major change in Zahra’s life as well: it is the social declaration of her ‘manhood’.

Hadj Ahmed knows that a successful circumcision ceremony is vital to his plans: it is the most public test of the lie he has constructed. He asks himself, ‘Comment ne pas fêter avec faste le passage à l’âge d’homme de cet enfant?’ (31). Because the passage is a false one, it needs to be all the more socially recognised and legitimised. The Hadj manages to keep up the façade without anyone suspecting, or acting as if they suspect, his actions:

Figurez-vous qu’il a présenté au coiffeur-circonciseur son fils, les jambes écartées, et que quelque chose a été effectivement coupé, que le sang a coulé, éclaboussant les cuisses de l’enfant et le visage du coiffeur. L’enfant a même pleuré et il fut comblé de cadeaux apportés par toute la famille. (32)

The ‘coiffeur’ seen earlier is now the ‘coiffeur-circonciseur’: the man who wields the scissors for the first haircut, symbolic of the severing of the child’s links to a world before birth, is also charged with the circumcision, an act that removes the child from the general category of childhood and proclaims manhood. The ritual appears to be a success because the ‘circumcision’ has effectively silenced any of the doubts surrounding Zahra’s biological sex. Silence does not mean that they are dispelled, however; they have just moved underground. Zahra’s uncles are not easy to convince, but ‘quels que fussent leurs soupçons ils ne se risquèrent à aucune plaisanterie douteuse ni sous-entendu quant au sexe de l’enfant’ (32). The apparent completion of the ritual has made public questioning of the child’s sex unacceptable.

What is, of course, significant about this mock circumcision is that Zahra is never circumcised. As with the naming ceremony, there is a serious contradiction between appearance
and reality. By circumcising his own finger rather than any part belonging to Zahra, Hadj Ahmed has further embedded himself in his self-delusion, and at the moment when a child's liminality is supposed to be adequately mitigated, Zahra is thrust into an ever more exaggerated liminality: her incorporation into the male world is socially recognised, but never ritually completed. Her blood is not shed, it is her father's. This substitute for bloodshed is continued throughout Zahra's young adulthood as Chapter II will show. Zahra remains explicitly 'betwixt and between' because this most important rite of passage is not completed and because of the paradox created by the contrast between her authentic and social identities.

Azaro's incorporation into the male world directly follows his homecoming from the police officer's house. The separation from his mother on the night of the fire is a catalyst for Azaro's growing closeness to his father. During Azaro's initial readjustment to his environment, he is afraid of his father for reasons unknown even to himself. Soon, however, he begins to want to spend time with Dad. When he goes with his father to collect the wild boar to feast his homecoming, he notes, 'That evening Dad became the guardian giant who led me into the discoveries of our new world' (FR 34), signifying that Dad is the person who controls access to the 'new world', which is mysterious to Azaro. Dad 'led us down a narrow path' and 'lifted me with his powerful arm and carried me on the rock of his shoulder' (34) emphasising Dad's strength and Azaro's reliance on him for making his way successfully through the forest. Once Dad's destination is reached, however, he leaves Azaro on his own while he conducts his business there, returning looking 'exhausted, as if he had been wrestling with demons' (39). Dad carries the wild boar he has caught to Mum with the words, "I have kept my promise" (40). Significantly, in both Zahra's circumcision and Dad's capture of the boar, it is the father who is taking charge of an event intended for the child. Dad and Hadj Ahmed shed their own blood for their respective children, whilst the children remain unharmed. As a result, though the event does signal a shift toward the father for Azaro and Zahra, neither child is transformed by the event.

For Azaro, the ritual continues at the homecoming party itself. Azaro's homecoming is not complete until it has been publicly feasted by the entire compound: the women's celebration is a good start, but in itself is not sufficient. Once the guests have gathered, an 'old man made a libation at both posts of the door and prayed for us and thanked the ancestors that I had been found and asked that I never be lost again' (42), sanctifying Azaro's return for his community and reinforcing the idea that the experience is a rite of passage through the attention paid to the doorway of the house. And yet, though Azaro is the guest of honour, the fact that he is still not fully incorporated into this world is clearly expressed. Azaro says, 'I felt like a stranger amidst the celebration of my homecoming' (41). This extended celebration of

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10Zahra notes in NS that 'je devais avoir trois ou quatre ans' (114) at the time of her circumcision. The storyteller in ES does not focus on this large time lapse between important rituals. He says simply, 'Et l'enfant grandit dans une
Azaro's homecoming marks the beginning of his closeness with Dad, and has the intention of further solidifying Azaro's place within the community. The purpose is not wholly fulfilled because Azaro still feels a stranger. However, for both children, their education into the social role assigned to young boys is about to begin, and is equally based on deception and misconception. Instead of Azaro's and Zahra's identities within their communities being based on the accumulation of names and specific roles, they move from one mis-initiation to another. These rites of passage are especially significant because the status of the child changes quite dramatically after the 'circumcision' and homecoming party. Before the 'circumcision' ceremonies Azaro and Zahra are still not fully incorporated into their role within the social structure. Their instability, largely related to physical dependency and a child's capacity for understanding, prevents them from having to behave in accordance with the norms set for adults. Their parents are initially pleased with and proud of their children. Azaro writes that 'in the early years Mum was quite proud of me. “You are a child of miracles,” she would say. “Many powers are on your side”’ (FR 9). Mum does not realise what Azaro does; he is only a child of miracles ‘for as long as my cord to other worlds remained intact’ (9). Zahra’s father has a similar positive impression of her. He tells her, ‘Je savais à ce moment-là que de cette étreinte naîtrait un enfant exceptionnel’ (NS 28). Hadj Ahmed’s desire to have an exceptional ‘son’ is more pronounced than Mum’s: she bases her assessment on Azaro’s actual behaviour, whilst Hadj Ahmed decides at the moment of conception on the behaviour he will see later. In each case there is a strong note of irony, as Zahra is, indeed, ‘exceptionnelle’ and Azaro is a ‘child of miracles’ with the very powers Mum ascribes to him. Their parents point out the truth whilst not recognising it fully and not wanting it to be so: Hadj Ahmed only wants Zahra to be ‘exceptional’ insofar as she succeeds in her masculine role, just as Mum wishes Azaro to be miraculous for a human. These superlative expressions are robbed of their force by being used in this clichéd manner by parents who do not use them reflect a true understanding of these special individuals. As Azaro and Zahra age, both sets of parents have to contend with the frustration and disappointment of children who do not fulfil their parents’ and communities’ expectations because, as indicated earlier, they do not really want an exception to the very strict rules of sexual or natural (as opposed to supernatural) convention.

After the ‘circumcision’ ritual, each ‘boy’—Zahra and Azaro—is expected to take on an ever-increasing number of the rights and responsibilities of ‘his’ position. Turner writes that
the ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more [after the rite of passage has been completed] and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and 'structural' type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social positions in a system of such positions. (1969: 95)

After three sets of rituals, Azaro and Zahra are considered by their communities to be ‘relatively stable’ and thus required to do what their parents ask, to conform to the ‘customary norms and ethical standards’ as determined by their fathers. Therefore, not only do Azaro’s and Zahra’s ‘circumcision’ rituals act to confirm their position as ‘boys’, but to confer upon them the responsibilities and obligations to behave in accordance with this position. The enforcement of these social responsibilities is important to their parents as yet another way to remove or reduce Azaro’s and Zahra’s threat to the social status quo.

At this point, the focus of the chapter will shift to analyse parental expectations and motivations in relation to these liminal children. Such analysis is required in order to understand fully the impact that Azaro and Zahra have on their parents and their communities. For these children are not liminal outwith a social context: they are liminal because of their relationship to their social context and expectations of them. Only when the desires and expectations of their fathers are looked at in detail is the full significance of Azaro’s and Zahra’s evasion of social classification revealed. Examination of these expectations and parental instructions heightens the already acute tension between image and reality in the texts. Once this has been established, it will be possible in this chapter to discuss further implications of Azaro’s and Zahra’s identities.

II. EDUCATION AND EXPECTATION

This section of the chapter has two aims, which will be pursued simultaneously: the first is to analyse the role of Azaro’s and Zahra fathers as representatives of social law and convention; the second is to establish Azaro’s and Zahra’s changed position within their communities. For both children, the father is of paramount importance in inculcating the child into the workings of the greater community. This is made explicit in ES, in which, after the circumcision ceremony, it is stated that ‘Ahmed grandissait selon la loi du père qui se chargeait personnellement de son éducation: la fête était finie. Il fallait à présent faire de cette enfant un homme, un vrai’ (ES 34). This passage provides rich material for interpretation, particularly with reference to Hadj Ahmed’s actions and motivations.

The first layer to be examined is be the rather pragmatic level of the Hadj’s role as educator of his ‘son’. The appropriateness of the father to fulfil the role of educator does not rest exclusively in his wish to bring up ‘Ahmed’ in his own image. In his book Archetype: A Natural History of the Self Anthony Stevens points out that
Almost universally, the father possesses a centrifugal orientation (i.e. towards society and the outside world) in contrast to the mother's centripetal concern (i.e. with home and family) [...] By representing society to the family and his family to society, the father facilitates the transition of the child from home to the world at large. He encourages the development of skills necessary for the successful adult adaptation, while at the same time communicating to the child the values and mores prevailing in the social system. (1982: 107)

The difference between the roles of the parents is certainly implied by the division of space in Moroccan Muslim society observed by Mernissi; the father is the only person well-placed to take on this function. Hadj Ahmed takes his role of ‘communicating’ to Zahra the ‘values and mores’ of their society very seriously, at least in appearance; his ‘centrifugal’ function consists of sending Zahra to school, one more affirmation of her place as a boy, only boys being sent to Koranic school: ‘Il allait avec d’autres garçons à une école coranique privée’ (ES 34). As Zahra ages, Hadj Ahmed instructs her in dealing with the public through her visits to his workshop: Zahra writes that her father ‘m’expliquait la marche des affaires, me présentait à ses employés et ses clients. Il leur disait que j’étais l’avenir’ (37). Again, he does this as much to assert Zahra’s masculinity to his workers as to tutor her in business matters—‘L’important, pour lui, c’était ma présence parmi tous ces hommes’ (38)—at the mosque, and at the workplace. Zahra’s father is the guardian of appearance, of social acceptability and he does his best to uphold his—and Zahra’s—position in the public, religious domain.

The concrete manifestations of the Hadj’s instruction lead directly to its symbolic significance. The ‘loi du père’ in the passage above is meant to enforce this society’s version of the ‘customary norms and ethical standards’ referred to by Turner and stresses Hadj Ahmed’s belief in his role as a patriarch. This ‘loi du père’ evokes Jacques Lacan’s theory of the ‘nom du père’, not least because Ben Jelloun is a trained psychoanalyst and would not use such terminology lightly. Lacan writes, ‘C’est dans le nom du père qu’il nous faut reconnaître le support de la fonction symbolique qui, depuis l’orée des temps historiques, identifie sa personne à la figure de la loi’ (1966: 278). Stevens gives a useful explication of this symbolic function, observing that

the father archetype personifies as the Elder, the King, the Father in Heaven. As Lawgiver he speaks with the voice of collective authority and is the living embodiment of the Logos principle: his word is law. As Defender of the Faith and of the Realm he is the guardian of the status quo and bastion against all enemies. (1982: 105)

Hadj Ahmed’s fulfilment of these function in the concrete sense may be seen in his ‘centrifugal’ functions and his and Zahra’s relationship is strongly affected by it. The paternal symbolic
function is also meaningful because emphasis on the figurative rather than the literal relegates the physiological role of the female in bearing children to insignificance. Elizabeth Grosz explains that the

`Law of the Father', as Lacan sees it, is the threshold between the ‘Kingdom of culture’ and that of ‘nature abandoned to the law of copulation’. It is not a function of Real, biological blood relations, but of systems of nomenclature or kinship systems. (1990: 70)

Hadj Ahmed is both the Real and the Symbolic father, but his emphasis on the latter function further removes Zahra from her mother and her body. In true Lacanian form, this makes the ‘question of paternity’ a ‘matter of naming, of the Father’s Name, not his blood’ (70). In the French texts, not only is Zahra named by her father, establishing paternity, but Hadj Ahmed takes full credit for the conception of the child. Before the child begins to grow in the womb, he has created it in his own image by giving it his name. He tells his wife, ‘Ahmed restera seul et régnera sur cette maison de femmes’ (ES 23). This act of creation is far more important than what occurs in the mother’s body; Zahra has no mother, as Hadj Ahmed tells her himself: ‘je te considérais comme un demi-orphelin’ (NS 28). He even goes as far as to proclaim to Zahra, ‘Toi, je t’ai conçue’ (28). The Hadj is utterly convinced of his unbounded command, not only over his family, but over nature and the ‘fate’ that has thus far denied him a boy. In this way, positive aspects of maternity and female sexuality are ignored in the texts, demonstrating a disturbing sexual politics that will be further examined in Chapter II.

Zahra’s relationship to her father is closely tied to her perception of the Father and his Law, a law that is immutable and unrestricted because it is related to a symbolic function rather than mere biology. For Lacan and for Freud, the symbolic function of the Father is vital to the boy’s adoption of the social laws that will ultimately bind him. The nom du père is vital to the child’s future position within his society. As Grosz explains,

In introjecting the name-of-the-father, the child (or, rather, the boy) is positioned with reference to the father’s name. He is now bound to the law, in so far as he is implicated in the symbolic ‘debt’, given a name, and an authorized speaking position. (1990: 71)

It has already been seen that Hadj Ahmed gives Zahra a name (two, in fact) and clearly has the intention of giving her an authorized speaking position as a man. Because Hadj Ahmed has failed biologically to conceive a boy, his belief in his symbolic function is all the greater; therefore, his implementation of the ‘loi du père’ is spectacularly strict in order to preserve the deception he has engineered and assert his symbolic function, as seen throughout Zahra’s childhood. Thus, the education of Zahra yields more clues about Hadj Ahmed and his belief in
his own will-to-power than about Zahra’s ‘masculinity’, though the sole purpose of this education is to affirm her place as male.

Paternal expectations of Zahra relate almost solely to her socially-recognised identity as a boy: the importance of sex distinctions in ES and NS cannot be overestimated. Lalla Radhia, the woman drafted by Hadj Ahmed as midwife for Zahra’s birth, attributes specifically male characteristics to the fetus the wife carries. She

\[ \text{disait que son intuition ne l’avait jamais trahie, ce sont là des choses incontrôlables par la raison; elle sentait qu’à la manière dont cet enfant bougeait dans le ventre de sa mère, ce ne pouvait être qu’un garçon. Il donnait des coups avec la brutalité qui caractérise le mâle. (ES 24)} \]

This assumption is not necessarily a fabrication on Lalla Radhia’s part in order to facilitate the intrigue; such beliefs are not uncommon in North African Muslim cultures. Platt states that from conception there is a ‘prenatally fulfilled expectation that the behaviour of males and females will be distinct’ (1988: 273). Lalla Radhia’s remarks would be plausible to her listeners; one would expect a midwife to attempt an identification of sex from early in the pregnancy. The belief that the behaviour of males and females will be distinct also makes the obfuscation of Zahra’s true sex all the more risky, as Hadj Ahmed would fear that Zahra’s ‘authentic’ nature would be at risk of coming out at any time. Therefore, he must assert his paternal power by subjugating her ‘natural’ female tendencies.\(^\text{11}\) He is successful in doing so when he rebukes her sharply for any display of feminine behaviour. Zahra is bullied by some boys and runs home crying. Of the experience she writes, ‘mon père me donna une gifle dont je me souviens encore et me dit: “Tu n’es pas une fille pour pleurer! Un homme ne pleure pas!” Il avait raison, les larmes, c’est très féminin!’ (NS 39). This is an early example of Zahra’s internalisation and acceptance of her father’s law. She does not, at this stage, want to display any feminine traits. She conceives of her own masculine identity through the rejection of all feminine attributes.

Dad’s role as Azaro’s educator will be discussed on the two levels used to analyse Hadj Ahmed’s behaviour: the concrete paternal role and the symbolic paternal function. Dad is not as successful as Hadj Ahmed in his role as social mediator and instructor for his family, though he does fulfil the criteria in a limited fashion because he is out in the world carrying loads or going to bars; he also attempts to ‘educate’ Azaro on several occasions. Though Azaro’s liminality does not result from a discrepancy between his social and biological sex, much of the instruction Dad gives to him is based on his adoption of appropriate male behaviour. There are a number of socially-accepted characteristics of ‘manliness’ that Azaro is encouraged by Dad to display. A first example of socially-constructed virility to be encouraged in the young boy is

\(^{11}\text{The question of ‘nature’ will be raised and discussed in Chapter II, as it is difficult to assess whether or not ES and NS attempt to challenge the understanding in Muslim society of ‘natural’ sex differences.} \)
drinking. Azaro is praised for drinking palm-wine ‘peacefully’—That’s how to be a man (FR 86), Madame Koto tells him. Dad’s instruction is even more explicit: ‘Learn to drink, my son. A man must be able to hold his drink because drunkenness is sometimes necessary in this difficult life’ (35). A second instance of gendered behaviour expectations of Azaro occurs when he is rebuked for being knocked over by a (mere) woman’s sneeze, a treatment that recalls Zahra’s punishment for the same ‘womanly’ transgression of the law of the Father. Dad says, ‘A woman sneezes and it blows you away? Are you not a man?’ (298). The extent to which Azaro’s entire existence is predicated on a misconception is simply emphasised by the fact that, on this particular occasion, it is the influence of the spirits that causes Azaro’s exaggerated reaction to the woman’s sneeze. Dad encourages Azaro to conform to standards for a community of which he is secretly and existentially not a part. This situation is all the more interesting in the light of the symbolic significance of Dad’s instruction of his son.

As discussed earlier, after Azaro’s return from the police officer’s house, it is Dad who ‘became the guardian giant who led me into the discoveries of our new world’ (34). The image of Dad as the ‘guardian giant’ clearly suggests the powerful Symbolic father, whose duty it is to ‘give the child a name and an authorized speaking position’; though Mum is a hawker (a trade that entails travel), she does not attempt to initiate Azaro into the public sphere. Despite Dad’s manifold failures to provide for the family and otherwise live up to the patriarchal ideal, he does see himself in the role of the Symbolic father with all of its attendant powers. Dad’s version of the ‘loi du père’ consists in requiring Azaro to imitate him:

‘You,’ [Dad] said, pointing at me, so that I felt myself distinguished from everything else in the universe, ‘You can do what you like, but you also do what I tell you. From today listen carefully to what I say, watch carefully what I do. This life is a joke that is not really a joke. Even mosquitoes know they have to survive.’ (412)

The fact that Dad’s gesture makes Azaro feel ‘distinguished from everything else in the universe’ suggests his power to bring Azaro to a sense of self. As Grosz explains, ‘The paternal metaphor is not a simple incantation but the formula by which the subject […] becomes an ‘I’, and can speak in its own name’ (1990: 71). Though Dad allows Azaro a measure of freedom by suggesting that Azaro can ‘do what he likes’, he strongly emphasises Azaro’s duty to observe, imitate and obey, in keeping with the idea that Azaro should be the image of his father.

However, the advisability of such a response by Azaro is highly suspect: Dad does manage to survive, but as he is himself so unsuccessful in achieving anything more, it is unlikely that he will be able to transmit much of use to his son. In this he is the opposite of Hadj Ahmed, whose power is formidable. Dad’s words to live by are so inconsistent that Azaro would be hard-pressed to follow them to the letter. In fact, the relationship between Dad’s ‘law’ and Azaro’s behaviour is significant in showing that Azaro is the more successful in taking
on the traditional masculine role, which he does from an early age. With regard to Mum, Azaro wishes to change his role to that of protector rather than protected:

> It seemed very harsh not to be able to go hawking with her, not to be able to protect her feet, and help her sell off all her provisions. I followed her and then she turned, saw me, and waved me on to school. I slowed down, turned back, and watched her disappear into the expanding ghetto. (*FR* 82)

This type of role reversal is also evident in two other instances. One of the rare moments of prosperity for the family occurs when Azaro is given a large sum of money by Madame Koto. Significantly, neither Dad nor Mum succeeds in bringing this kind of wealth into the family. The usual parent-child relationship is inverted because the money enters the family through Azaro, who should normally be provided for, not the provider. Furthermore, Dad's illiteracy forces Azaro to read the books he buys because he is incapable of doing so (408). In this way, Dad's attempts to lay down the 'loi du père' are unsuccessful, though his desire to do so is clear.

The parental expectations placed upon Zahra and Azaro as they grow older may be contextualised by looking more closely at the way children are identified in their communities. Children are recognised both as being different from adults and as the same. Jenks writes that 'the child is familiar to us and yet strange, he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another, he or she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a systematically different order of being' (1990: 3). Children are so recently from the other world that their connection to it is strong; they are also ignorant of the ways of the world and their community. The child is a stranger whom the adult often attempts to understand or control both through rites of passage and through teaching the child how to be an adult. It has been noted also that tradition plays a fundamental role in the upbringing of Zahra and Azaro and its authority is represented by their fathers. Jenks observes that 'The child's serious purpose and our intentions towards him or her are dedicated to a resolution of [the] initial paradox' (3) of the child being of ourselves but somehow different.

Ritual is unable to contain the risk that Azaro and Zahra could present to the social structure. Though they are more fully incorporated into that structure through ritual than they would be without it, they remain resistant to the attempts by their parents to force them into their proper social roles. It is useful to return to Turner's definition of the liminar, who is liminal not only within a rite of passage, but within the greater social hierarchy. He says that the attributes of such persons are 'necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (1969: 95). This chapter has demonstrated that, despite the commencement of the appropriate rites of passage designed to fix them within this cultural space, Azaro and
Zahra are characterised by ambiguity because of the unbridgeable distance between their assumed ‘known social location’ and their actual social location, or, indeed, their resistance to fit into one known social location.

The above analysis suggests that these two protagonists are exceptional, though in ways that their parents are unwilling to accept. This establishes right from the start of their lives their capacity to escape usual Laws. The inability of their parents to ‘resolve the paradox’ of their children affects their attitude toward their previously ‘exceptional’ and ‘miraculous’ children. The tension between image and reality increases with time as Azaro and Zahra begin to assert their own identities, which their parents have conspired to hide or ignore. Mum’s satisfaction in her son’s extraordinary powers fades when Azaro wanders off without permission and blames things on spirits his parents cannot see. Mum tells him, ‘If a spirit calls you [...] don’t go, you hear? Think of us. Think of your father who suffers every day to feed us. And think of me who carried you in my womb for more than nine months and who walks all the streets because of you’ (FR 306). Dad says to him, ‘You are a stubborn child, I am a stubborn father. If you want to return to the world of spirits, return! But if you want to stay, then be a good son!’ (325).

Even when Zahra is quite young, her father experiences tension in the way he would like to perceive her and the way she really is: ‘L’image que j’avais de toi se perdait, puis me revenait, trouble par tes jeux’ (NJ 29). Zahra’s games, which will be shown in Chapter II to be characteristic of her behaviour and, indeed, of her identity, indicate her ability to slip through the barriers of social convention and classification, in rebellion against the community, which is, in Turner’s words, ‘the repository of the whole gamut of the culture’s values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships’ (1969: 97). The analysis of Azaro’s and Zahra’s childhoods cannot be complete without introducing the connection between them and their respective nations—Nigeria and Morocco.

III. BIRTH AND THE NATION

It was suggested at the beginning of this chapter that birth is one of the major archetypal events used to understand transition. One of the most significant ways in which this may be seen in the texts is in the quasi-allegorical nature of Azaro’s and Zahra’s lives: their births are explicitly linked to the births of their nations. A very brief introduction to this allegory will be undertaken here to lay the foundation for its development in Chapters II and III. The invitation to allegorical interpretation for each set of texts is announced by the father, the traditional voice of the Law, which in itself is an interesting situation because these fathers are living under the colonial rule, in which their own law must take second place to that of the coloniser. Yet, they see a different future with their children.

Dad introduces the allegorical element at the end of FR, ‘Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It
CHAPTER 1: CHILDHOOD AND LIMINALITY

The reader must make the leap from ‘abiku country’ to ‘Azaro country’, suggesting that the reader has an important role in creating meaning in the text, an idea that will receive further attention, particularly in Chapter III and the Conclusion. If such a leap is made, and Azaro is seen as symbolic of his country’s birth, the reaction to his rescue from the police officer and his wife takes on an even greater significance. The women treat him as if ‘I had brought with me a new hope’ (28), whilst Madame Koto’s benediction further provides hope for the fate of the nation:

The road will never swallow you. The river of your destiny will always overcome evil. May you understand your fate. Suffering will never destroy you, but will make you stronger. Success will never confuse you or scatter your spirit, but will make you fly higher into the good sunlight. Your life will always surprise you. (47)

Thus, the allegorical connection allows for hope, despite the political corruption that plagues the country. Thus, Azaro’s own struggles to ‘stay’ in the human world may be interpreted as a representation of those that Nigeria has experienced since political Independence.

An even more explicit connection is made between Zahra and her country. When her father announces ‘Ahmed’s’ birth in the newspaper, he writes, ‘Vive Ahmed! Vive le Maroc!’ (30). However, whereas Dad’s comment is hopeful for Nigeria’s future through the emphasis on the nation’s choice to remain, Hadj Ahmed’s is almost a curse. No one but he, his wife and the midwife know that ‘Ahmed’ is really a girl. By connecting the ‘son’ and the country, Hadj Ahmed unwittingly invokes the idea that Morocco too will have its prosperity built on false pretences. This connection is emphasised by the statement that Hadj Ahmed makes of his ‘son’ to his workers, which directly parallels that made by the women welcoming Azaro back after his experience at the police officer’s house: ‘Il leur disait que j’étais l’avenir’ (ES 37). If this is the case, it is not necessarily a ringing endorsement of the new order. However, neither the police nor the nationalists could possibly see this meaning: ‘La police française n’aimait pas ce “Vive le Maroc!”’. Les militants nationalistes ne suvaient pas que cet artisan riche était aussi un bon patriote’ (30-1). In fact, Hadj Ahmed is no particular patriot. At no other point in either text does he refer to his country or any loyalty to it. More will be said about this, and the complexities of the allegory in Azaro’s case, in Chapter II and III. Its introduction here serves to suggest one more layer of meaning to the analysis undertaken in this chapter.

IV. CONCLUSION

It has been demonstrated in this chapter that the childhood rituals to which Azaro and Zahra are subjected by their communities fails; just like the ‘liminal hero’ that Nyatetu-Waigwa

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12 Indeed, this is one interpretation of the corruption and apathy plaguing the country of which Ben Jelloun is very aware and tackles in *L’Abfuge des pauvres*, despite its Italian setting.
discusses in her re-evaluation of the *Bildungsroman*, the rites of passage for Azaro and Zahra ‘remains incomplete, suspended forever in the liminal phase with regard to [the group] and other aspects of his culture’ (Nyatetu-Waigwa 1996: 3). This suspension is despite the best efforts of the parents, particularly the fathers, who have done their best to bind their children to the laws and conventions of which they are the regulators.

Azaro and Zahra do not experience full cycles of separation and incorporation, which leaves them eternally betwixt and between. This occurs in the failure of initiatory rituals of separation and incorporation, which have been shown to have limited success for each of the two characters. Because the rites of passage examined in this chapter have been designed to make clear their place in their families and their larger social community, there is failure not only in the rite of passage itself, but in the classification of Azaro’s and Zahra’s place within their social structure. Though they may seem ‘normal’ at first glance, both have a liminality that goes beyond the accepted and expected liminality of children. This means that their threat to the social structure is always alive, giving them enormous subversive power. Zahra always has the power to reveal her biological sex; Azaro to rejoin his friends in the spirit world at any time. Both children, though expected to obey, are also feared to a certain extent because, on some level, their parents recognise their power to undermine, in particular, the Law of the Father, which is a parallel to the Laws of society.

The continuing liminality resulting from failed ritual and imperfect understanding of the true nature of these children is crucial to an understanding of their relationship to their communities. Rites of passage are meant to represent the transformation of the liminar himself and/or to the status conferred upon him by his community. However, as these failures show, in the cases of Azaro and Zahra, the transformative effect of the rites of passage initiated by their communities is strictly limited to the way that these characters are perceived by others: real transformation only occurs when it is instigated by Zahra and Azaro themselves. This is the necessary focus of the next two chapters which will also relate the development of the protagonists more closely to the wider cultural and social preoccupations of the two authors.

Zahra’s conception of her identity is founded on an exploration of her sex and sexuality. Puberty presents a distressing challenge to her, as her father’s law ultimately fails to prevent her femininity from displaying itself. Through examination of her relationship with her sex and sexuality, her liminal identity is revealed with all of its consequences for her and those around her, which in turn will prove to have implications for Ben Jelloun’s portrayal of political and social realities. Chapter II will be devoted to this examination, and to the ways in which Azaro’s identity relates to sexuality.
CHAPTER II: GENDER ROLES AND SEXUALITY

Analysis in Chapter I of Azaro’s and Zahra’s initial liminality and their relationship to paternal expectation has laid the foundation for an examination in this chapter of the interplay between social expectation of gender and sexuality and its subversion by these characters. The purpose of this chapter is to examine Zahra’s negotiation of social expectation of identity, which is necessarily a sexual and sexualised identity; to demonstrate the key stages of Zahra’s development as manifested in her stint as a male-female impersonator, her stay in a children’s village and her relationship with the Consul; and to follow up the child-nation connection introduced in Chapter I. Unlike early childhood, in which public rituals were shown to be of great importance in establishing the children within their communities, Azaro’s and Zahra’s puberty is not marked by such rituals. Indeed, their communities do not formally recognise their sexual awakening. Rather, emphasis shifts to the characters’ own formation of sexual and gender identity, which nevertheless may be shown to derive in part from societal expectations.

An examination of adolescence is particularly fruitful in the exploration of Zahra’s and Azaro’s liminality because this stage of life is itself a transition or liminal period between childhood and adulthood, the time in which full integration into either the male or female gender is socially recognised. Van Gennep asserts that social puberty, the point at which the child is recognised by law and custom to have passed into adolescence, contains ‘rites of separation from the asexual world, and they are followed by rites of incorporation into the world of sexuality and, in all societies and all social groups, into a group confined to persons of one sex or another’ (1960: 67). In Zahra’s case, as with the other stages of her development, this transitional moment is symbolically represented by a door, ‘une percée dans le mur, une espèce de ruine qui ne mène nulle part’ (ES 41). The fact that it leads nowhere may be partially understood by applying van Gennep’s distinction between ‘physiological puberty and “social puberty”’ which ‘are essentially different and only rarely converge’ (65). Zahra cannot move into the physiological puberty of a boy, and thus is at an impasse, despite her socially-recognised male puberty. Physiologically it is a difficult time, a ‘moment trouble où le corps est perplexe’ (41). The storyteller notes, ‘En principe, cette porte correspond à l’étape de l’adolescence’ (41), but for Zahra, unsurprisingly, ‘c’est une période bien obscure’ (41). The storyteller’s use of the word ‘étape’ suggests that he views adolescence as one stage in a linear and conventional development; that Zahra’s experience of adolescence is ‘bien obscure’ is another example of the ways in which she is at odds with society and convention. The text presents Zahra’s development as if it is linear and progressive: she seems to go through clear stages of maturation and change. And though these stages are not publicly recognised through ritual, they are just as undermined as Zahra’s childhood rituals by her continuing liminality. The stages are presented as if they will lead to dramatic change in Zahra’s life and self-perception, but few of these actually do so. Any alteration is short lived, rather than full transformation after which
point there is no going back. The tension between the seemingly regular progression from stage to stage (facilitated by the storyteller’s use of the ‘door’ system) and the actual instability of Zahra’s progress will be highlighted throughout this chapter. As for Azaro, his social puberty is not mentioned at all, though he has experiences that strongly suggest budding physiological puberty.

Comparison of Azaro and Zahra in this chapter is more difficult than elsewhere in the thesis because Azaro, as a spirit rather than a human child, cannot be assessed by the same criteria as Zahra. He seemingly remains a child throughout the FR cycle, whereas Zahra is shown to grow and mature into adulthood. Furthermore, his identity is not primarily based on either his sex or his sexuality as Zahra’s is. However, several scenes in the texts depict his shifting sexual awareness, and will be examined for how they shed light on his identity. The conflict experienced by both children in their negotiation between maternity and female sexuality will be explored to establish the prevailing attitudes in the texts toward both. Throughout the chapter, a distinction will be made or suggested between sex and gender in which the former is biologically determined and the latter socially-constructed. However, it is also important to note that the relationship between sex and gender is not simple. As Judith Butler argues,

> gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or a ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. (1990: 7)

This very important recognition that even ‘biology’ may in some ways be interpreted as a social construct was suggested in Chapter I, when discussing the ‘prenatally fulfilled expectation that the behaviour of males and females will be distinct’ (Platt 1988: 273) in North African Muslim society and will play a significant part in the conclusions about gender roles, sex and sexuality that this chapter will propose.

I. EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN

It is important to situate Zahra and Azaro within the existing context of gender roles at work in their communities. Chapter I established the relationship of the children to their father’s Law; Zahra’s and Azaro’s mothers are similarly situated as subordinate to the father’s Law, particularly in ES and NS. It is useful here to recall the distinctions outlined between paternal and maternal roles as suggested in Chapter I. The father in his ‘centrifugal’ function has free reign over both public and private space, and, as Stevens notes, ‘his word is law’ (1982: 105), whilst the mother is confined to the private space of the home. Indeed, the maternal role as presented in the texts is nearly the opposite of the paternal: the feminine is associated with maternity and physically-expressed sexuality, with the private rather than the public sphere,
the body rather than the Word. The different ways this is presented in the texts provide significant clues to the difference in gender perceptions within these communities and will be briefly explored here.

The differences in the daily lives of women in each set of texts may be seen through comparison of their visits to a key site in each novel, namely the hammam in ES and Madame Koto’s bar in FR. These sites are particularly interesting because visiting them takes women out of the home and into arenas that are traditionally male. The women in the hammam in ES do not discuss a wider sphere; they are either unconcerned with or ignorant about anything outside the domestic realm. Zahra asserts that ‘pour toutes ces femmes, la vie était plutôt réduite. C'était peu de chose: la cuisine, le ménage, l'attente et une fois par semaine le repos dans le hammam’ (ES 34). The strict regulation of space in their culture assures that the knowledge of these women is limited. By contrast, women and mothers in FR have a place in the public sphere that is not accorded to women in the French texts. During the day, the female hawkers use Madame Koto’s bar as a place to discuss their lives. Azaro notes, ‘The ways of women: I learned a lot about what was happening in the country through them. I learned about the talk of Independence, about how the white men treated us, about political parties and tribal division’ (FR 76). These concerns are much the same as those of the men who gather in the bar in the evenings, as the women of Azaro’s community have a greater experience of the world, and the realm of their interest and activity is much larger, than in the French texts. This difference in the freedom of women in the texts should be kept in mind in the following examination of the role of the feminine and Azaro’s and Zahra’s relationship to it and the bar and the hammam will be ‘revisited’ throughout the chapter, as these spaces provide significant insights into gender and sexuality in the novels.

A. THE MATERNAL

Fatima Mernissi’s research outlines the contradictions in Muslim society, which she observes is

characterised by a contradiction between what can be called ‘an explicit theory’ and ‘an implicit theory’ of female sexuality and therefore a double theory of the sexes’ dynamics. The explicit theory is the prevailing contemporary belief according to which men are aggressive in their interaction with women, and women are passive. (1975: 4)

This ‘explicit theory’ may be seen at work in both sets of texts, in which passivity is shown in varying ways to be the ‘proper’ attribute to women. The ‘implicit theory’ will be examined in relation to female sexuality; though the role of women is broader in the English texts than the French, the underlying attitude towards femininity expressed in both theories is similar.
The feminine ideal as portrayed in FR and SE consists of a curious blend of the maternal and the sexless. Erich Neumann’s analysis of the ‘Good Mother’ archetype describes the ‘feminine elementary character’ as one ‘in which the woman contains and protects, nourishes and gives birth’ (1963: 120). Mum’s maternal qualities are manifested in her role as caretaker of the family; a particularly good example of this of Azaro’s description of her calculating ‘her profits without any light in the room. When she finished she began to repair our clothes, sewing on buttons, patching holes in Dad’s trousers’ (FR 280). One of the earliest descriptions of Mum is that she ‘looked the picture of forebearance [sic]’ (121) and this becomes typical of her as the character is developed, despite her intermittent rebelliousness. However, the archetype of the Good Mother is also based on the physical attributes of femininity and implied potential fecundity: Neumann notes, “The archetypal experience of the Feminine as all-nourishing is evident in the multiplication of the breast motif” (1963: 124). Mum’s breasts, belly, and buttocks—the body parts most commonly associated with the maternal—are not mentioned in FR and SE. Instead, Mum’s physicality is dramatically underplayed in the texts, despite the fact that on two occasions Azaro hears his parents having sex. The best example of Mum’s sexless maternity is her transformation in SE:

Mum rose from her sleep as if she were emerging from a mythic river. Her hair flowed brightly round her face. Her skin had been washed a marvellous roseate colour by her dreams. [...] Mum rose from her long sleep and bore herself with the serenity of a princess. She was beautiful and silent, as if her sleep had given her strange powers. (73)

Her silent and beautiful transformation does not actually take her away from the patriarchal ideal of women, quite the opposite. In fact, her transformation has a curative effect on her family because they are well-cared for and well-fed: ‘When she went to the market she brought back the most amazing fishes, lovely vegetables, and bread which had in it the perpetual essence of childhood. Her cooking tasted sublime’ (74). Thus, though she has somehow taken on the qualities of a goddess or a mythic creature, part of this creature’s role is to nurture and provide. Mum’s maternal qualities are not diminished after her transformation: only her sexuality is curtailed. Indeed, Mum is so sublimely radiant that Dad ‘didn’t dare get into bed with her’ (77), clearly indicating that sexuality is not part of her new character. It is suggested that Mum is better able to care for her family once her selfish sexuality has been mitigated. Through her newfound ‘herbal lore’ (94), Mum is also connected to the ‘antelope women’ who were ‘singing of the forgotten ways of our ancestors. They were warning us not to change too much, not to disregard the earth’ (79). And yet, though Okri privileges Mum’s knowledge of the old ways, his

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1Neumann discusses the archetype of the Great Mother as being composed of the ‘positive elementary character’, the Good Mother, and the ‘negative elementary character’, the Terrible Mother. In the following analysis, I will be referring to Mum as associated with the Good Mother portion and Madame Koto to the Terrible Mother.
representation of her is closer to the patriarchal Christian image of the Virgin Mother, who takes on the nurturing role but is not sullied by the physical. Though Mum has lost her goddess-like sexlessness by the end of SE, she is never shown to have monstrously sexual characteristics. Thus, though the feminine ideal presented in the texts is maternal, domestic, and silent, it is not sexualised.

ES and NS do not present a positive image of the feminine ideal. Rather, Zahra’s mother is defined by her silence and submission. In this, she fulfils the role set out for her by her society and her husband as upholder of that society. Femininity, as it is presented in ES and NS, is not based upon the kind of sexless, selfless nurturing maternity demonstrated in the English texts. Zahra’s father describes his wife as ‘une femme de bien, épouse soumise, obéissante’ (NS 21); although these qualities make her the ideal Muslim wife, he does not seem to appreciate them. He tells Zahra that ‘Ta mère n’avait aucun désir. Éteinte. Élle a toujours été éteinte, fanée. A-t-elle été un jour heureuse? Je me le demande encore’ (25). So self-effacing is she that Hadj Ahmed says, ‘Il n’arrivait d’oublier complètement son existence, son nom, sa voix’ (25). The reader does not have the luxury of forgetting her name because it is never given. She is only ‘mother’ or ‘wife’, more often the former. Zahra’s mother, abused for her obedience to her husband’s commands and her society’s precepts is not given a voice of her own in ES, nor a subjectivity independent of her role. Instead, her maternity and femininity are an emptiness in the text which cannot be filled, a silence that seemingly cannot be broken. Zahra’s mother, as has been shown, epitomises the explicit theory of femininity. The balance is only partially redressed in NS, where Zahra remembers her saying, ‘J’ai décidé de vivre dans le silence de la voix étouffée par mes propres mains’ (52). The clear distinction between the powerful voice of the father and the silence of the mother is vital to an understanding of the rigid distinctions between the paternal and maternal, the masculine and the feminine within the texts. Though the French texts seem to rely on these rigid distinctions, the exaggeration of the portrayal of both father and mother may be read as an implicit critique of both, however, the presentation of female sexuality in both sets of texts is equally negative.

B. FEAR OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

Female sexuality in both sets of texts is portrayed as overpowering, all-engulfing, voracious and threatening when presented in the form of Madame Koto in the English texts and the Assise of the hammam in NS. Neither woman conforms to the ‘explicit theory’ of femininity; rather, they correspond to the ‘implicit theory’, as outlined by Mernissi:
The implicit theory [perceives] civilization as struggling to contain the female's destructive, all-absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can only survive by creating the institutions which foster male domination through sexual segregation. (1975: 4)

Both the explicit and implicit theories are in play with regard to women and ideas about female sexuality in the texts. These theories are succinctly put by Fatouma in ES: ‘une femme, dans ce pays, a pris l'habitude de se taire ou alors elle prend la parole avec violence’ (161). ‘Prendre la parole’ may itself be interpreted as a violent act by a woman because she is seizing the phallic power embodied in the Word, to do so with added violence only emphasises the transgression. Madame Koto and the Assise are outside traditional gender roles because they are career women, with a strong presence and even influence in the public sphere.

Madame Koto’s character distorts maternal capacity into something terrifying; though her voluptuousness seems to proclaim fecundity, she is voraciously sexual rather than maternal: a negative connotation clear in Azaro’s observation of ‘shameless libidinous potency’ (FR 290). The texts do not allow maternity and sexuality to coexist. Unlike Mum’s, Madame Koto’s physical form amply fits the description of the mother archetype. The first mention of her body is in Azaro’s description of ‘her great breasts quivering in the hot room’ (47), though the sexual implication is not pursued at this point in the novel. Later she is described as ‘plump as a mighty fruit’ (204), suggesting that she is ‘ripe’ and fertile. Madame Koto’s body becomes bigger as her power increases and her magnitude becomes more and more disturbing, setting up a clear correlation between exaggerated female physicality and increased corruption and power, which the end of this chapter will amplify. Azaro finds her ‘wholly enveloped in an invisible aura of power, a force-field of dread. Her stomach was really big and she seemed very wide’ (371). Madame Koto’s size and power have both increased even further in SE. Azaro finds that Madame Koto ‘is everywhere. Her body is eating up the night’ (SE 42). Her corpulence is connected to an uncontainable sexual desire which is portrayed as disgusting and dangerous, particularly in SE; this is a clear portrayal of the Terrible Mother, or the castrating female.

Neumann describes

the unity of the Feminine which as avid womb attracts the male and kills the phallus within itself in order to achieve satisfaction and fecundation, and which as the earth-womb of the Great Goddess, as womb of death, attracts and draws in all living things, likewise for its own satisfaction and fecundation. (1963: 171-2)

Therefore, Madame Koto’s sexuality is not designed to beget children, a laudable aim, which would make her controllable within a patriarchal society. Instead, she acts for her own
CHAPTER II: GENDER ROLES AND SEXUALITY

'satisfaction and fecundation'. The threat posed by her 'Terrible' qualities may be seen in the fact that, despite her seeming fecundity, she has no children. Dad tells Azaro, 'She is a witch, a wicked woman. That's why she has no children' (306), clearly associating childlessness with wickedness: Madame Koto is a sexual being without having children, the ultimate sin.

The Assise is similarly portrayed as a subversive, sexual figure. She is 'brune, forte, avec un fessier impressionnant—d'où son nom, l'Assise—, elle n'avait pas d'âge. Un visage à la peau lisse, mate. Sa corpulence n'était pas un handicap mais un atout pour le métier qu'elle exerçait' (NS 69). Her physical form adds to her power, but because she does not use this physicality in the domestic maternal realm, she is suspected of all manner of perversities:

Rarement mariée, veuve, ou divorcée, l'Assise n'a pas vraiment une vie de famille. Elle est à part dans la société et personne ne se soucie de savoir comment ni avec quel fantôme elle passe ses nuits. On lui prête alors une vie imaginaire où elle serait incestueuse et homosexuelle, tireuse des cartes et jetouse des sorts, perverse et monstrueuse. (69-70)

The Assise's power puts her morals in question. The implication here is that the woman not contained by restriction to the private, domestic sphere is threatening, partly because of the assumption that women are devastatingly sexual: 'Woman is the fitna, the polarization of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential' (Mernissi 1975: 13). Like Madame Koto, the Assise 'a de gros seins qui font peur aux enfants mais sont recherchés par les adolescents qui rêvent de fourrer leur tête sous leur poids' (NS 69-70). There is implicit sexuality rather than maternity in her breasts, because children, who would normally be nourished from the breast, are afraid, whereas adolescents going through a sexual awakening are attracted to them, emphasising the ambiguity of this figure.

This brief analysis of the conflicting attitudes toward women, combined with the analysis of the paternal role undertaken in Chapter I, allows a preliminary discussion of Zahra's and Azaro's perception of themselves as gendered beings and their own feelings about female sexuality.

II. ZAHRA'S AND AZARO'S ATTITUDES TOWARD GENDER ROLES AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

A. AWARENESS AND DIFFERENTIATION

In order to clarify the discussion of their development (or lack thereof) throughout the texts, it is useful to explain how Zahra and Azaro position themselves with regard to gender roles and expectations in their earliest stages. Zahra, unsurprisingly, is the more interesting character in this regard. The style of her journal entry about one of her early experiences going
to the hammam suggests an initial lack of awareness or concern about gender differences. Her mother:

avait un fichu sur la tête qui retenait le henné étalé dans sa chevelure la veille. Moi, je n'avais pas de henné dans les cheveux. Lorsque je voulus en mettre, elle me l'interdit et me dit: ‘C'est réservé aux filles!’ Je me tus et la suivis au hammam. (ES 33)

The simple adjective-free structure conveys an impression of uncomplicated observation and easy-going obedience of her mother rather than fear or real understanding of the implications of her request. Yet, this childlike acceptance is suspect, as it is a retrospective written account, shaped by Zahra’s later experiences. This apparent acceptance of her mother’s explanation and Zahra’s own male identity are not lasting. The same account of the visit to the hammam shows her need to distance herself from the other women and their circumscribed lives: ‘J’étais secrètement content de ne pas faire partie de cet univers si limité’ (34). Importantly, she uses the masculine adjective form ‘content’ instead of ‘contente’, further emphasising the distinction. Thus, though the portrayal is not wholly consistent, Zahra’s perception of herself as a gendered (and male) being is evident from early in her life. Azaro, by contrast, seems oblivious to his own gender identity and any importance that may be attached to it. There are no examples in the text showing Azaro’s identity as primarily or even secondarily constructed by his gender, though, as Chapter I demonstrated, his parents sometimes give him instructions in masculinity. Zahra and Azaro are more similar in their experience of female sexuality.

B. FEMALE SEXUALITY

Zahra’s fear of femininity stems from the split between her social and biological identities: for all the reasons examined in Chapter I and above, the female body is forbidden territory. The hammam is the site in the texts in which this fear is most apparent, as Zahra is directly confronted with fully-developed naked female bodies. From her early wish to emulate her mother by putting henna in her hair, Zahra quickly seeks to distance herself from all she perceives to be female or feminine. Her fear is manifested through disgust: ‘Je m’accrochais à ces cuisses étalées et j’entrevoyais tous ces bas-ventres charnus et poilus. Ce n’était pas beau. C’était même dégoûtant’ (ES 36). The vocabulary emphasises the negative connotation of the female form: she finds nothing comforting or maternal in it. Her distancing tactics are partially successful because she has not yet gone through physiological puberty. Upon examining her own vagina she discovers ‘rien de décadent; une peau blanche et limpide, douce au toucher, sans plis, sans rides’ (36); at this point in her development, she finds nothing in her own body that would identify her with the women in the hammam. Yet despite this, she has nightmares with clear sado-masochistic elements resulting from this visit. ‘Le soir je m’endormais vite car je savais que j’allais recevoir la visite de ces silhouettes que j’attendais, muni d’un fouet,'
n’admettant pas de les voir si épaisses et si grasses’ (36). The women’s corpulence echoes the portrayal of the Assise and Madame Koto discussed above; it symbolises an uncontained and uncontrollable sexuality that is repulsive. Zahra displays an eagerness to confront the ‘silhouettes’ because in her dreams she can successfully subjugate them with the whip, the whip itself a symbol of the phallic power accorded to her by her father: ‘Je les battais car je savais que je ne serais jamais comme elles; je ne pouvais pas être comme elles... c’était pour moi un dégénérescence inadmissible’ (36). The vision demonstrates hatred for the women but also self-hatred because Zahra is necessarily also beating herself, punishing herself for being like them, for transgressing the phallic order.

The fact that this vision results from visits to the hammam is no accident. This is the only location in which women are liberated, not only from their clothes, but from the roles and restraints that go with them, as suggested earlier. This allows them to seem more like the wanton, excessively sexual woman that Mernissi relates to the ‘implicit theory’ of female sexuality. In the hammam, the women speak relatively freely, though in whispers, and their words have a dramatic effect on Zahra’s imagination. Like the ‘brouillard masculin’ to which Zahra refers when she begins to go to the baths with her father, there is a kind of ‘brouillard sexuel’ during the women’s visits to hammam relating to the content of their speech: ‘Il y avait des mots rares et qui me fascinaient parce que prononcés à voix basse, comme par exemple “mani”, “qlaoui”, “taboun”...’ (35). Zahra is sensitive enough to intuit the significance of the words because the women’s voices change when speaking them. ‘J’ai su plus tard que c’étaient des mots autour du sexe et que les femmes n’avaient pas le droit de les utiliser: “sperms”..., “couilles”..., “vagin”...’ (35). Though the women have technically not transgressed conventional propriety by saying forbidden words, they have nonetheless subverted the ‘law’ by making up their own words in colloquial Arabic. The coded vocabulary and whispers reinforce the shameful nature of sex and sexuality and the inappropriateness of women appearing to have any sexual or linguistic agency.

A variety of boundaries and transgressions are brought into play by this scene in the hammam. The first boundary is between the acceptable conversation of the women and their transgressive sexual discussion. While the women gossip in the hammam, Zahra imagines their words falling on her in droplets of steam; however, the forbidden words ‘ne tombaient pas. Ils devaient rester collés sur les pierres du plafond qu’ils imprénaient de leur teinte sale, blanchâtre ou brune’ (35). The adjectives ‘sales’, ‘blanchâtre’ and ‘brune’ clearly indicate the dirty and even shameful nature of sexual matters. In addition, there is clear evidence in this passage that the Word is masculine: ‘brune’ could refer to blood, ‘blanchâtre’ is later used by Zahra to describe semen and both are ‘coupled’ with the verb ‘imprénaient’. By using these powerful words, even in code, the women have transgressed the phallic order; they have actually managed to ‘prendre la parole’, though not with overt ‘violence’ in this case. The hammam is a liminal space
in which this transgression is made acceptable by the limitation of its duration. The second boundary, also relating to language, is between female and male use of the Word. When Zahra begins to go to the baths with her father, she

déchiffrais les pierres humides. Il n’avait rien dessus. [...] J’appris plus tard qu’il se passait bien des choses dans ces coins sombres, que les masseurs ne faisaient pas que masser, que des rencontres et retrouvailles avaient lieu dans cette obscurité, et que tant de silence était suspect! (37)

In the male domain, in which nothing is forbidden them linguistically, there is no need for words to rise to the ceiling and cling there. Rather, the silence of the men suggests perversion of proper masculine Muslim sexuality, in homosexual relations. Finally, it may be seen in this episode that Zahra conforms to social gendering norms by dissociating herself from the women and their transgressive discussion.

For Azaro, it is not too much silence about sexuality that disturbs him, it is excessive, and exclusively female, sexual expression. Azaro’s experience in the marketplace—a location traditionally dominated by women—suggests this fear. Azaro finds that ‘just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of objects’ (FR 161). For Azaro, it is the indistinguishability of the ‘loud and clashing voices’ and the ‘unholy fecundity of objects’ that so disturbs him. The use of ‘unholy’ emphasises the distasteful and transgressive fecundity of these objects.

Madame Koto’s bar is the place in which Azaro’s discomfort with female sexuality is made manifest. Late in FR Azaro notices the charged sexuality of the crowd in the bar. He notices a politician ‘plastering money on the sweating breasts of a woman who had danced with unbounded sensual ferocity’ (463). Like the phrase ‘unholy fecundity’, the term ‘unbounded sensual ferocity’ strongly emphasises the negative connotation of excessive female sexuality within the texts. Azaro finds that ‘sweat and sexual potency filled the air’ (452). The women create ‘heat-waves with the gyrations of their bottoms’, while they are ‘bursting with scandalous sexuality’ (449). This emphasis on the women’s ‘scandalous sexuality’ is in complete contrast with Mum’s behaviour which is neither scandalous nor (seemingly) sexual: Azaro’s portrayal of the women and the increasingly negative portrayal of Madame Koto seem to make his preference clear. This is also the case in SE in which Azaro comments on the very perfume the women in the bar wear as ‘masking their wickedness’ (107). This wickedness is connected to

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2P. C. Lloyd states that in traditional Yoruba society ‘local trade was dominated by women, long-distance trade by men’ (1974: 31). In more contemporary society the presence of women in trade remains. Sandra Barnes notes that ‘trade was the overwhelming occupational choice of metropolitan Lagos women’ in the 1970s (1986: 161).

3 The word ‘unholy’ is used several times in FR, always with the same connotation of transgression and distastefulness; for example, Azaro describes the ‘unholy horde of rats’ killed by the Photographer’s poison (FR 236).
female sexuality but also political corruption; as shall be seen at the end of the chapter, in Madame Koto's bar there is little difference between the two. However, even when Mum joins the workers in Madame Koto's bar, she is not portrayed as shamelessly sexual. Rather, she seems to represent the pure, admirable qualities of the maternal.

Though Azaro and Zahra share a fear of excessive female sexuality, their awareness of sexuality and gender differs. Zahra demonstrates an early awareness of gender and sexuality whilst Azaro's fear of female sexuality is more ambiguous, and linked to a fear of loud or merging voices. The initial attitudes and personal experiences of Zahra and Azaro to female sexuality established, it is possible to discuss their own physiological puberty. As Zahra is the only character who is shown to go through physiological puberty, the chapter will focus exclusively on her and her development until near the end of the chapter, in which Azaro's shifting sexual awareness and the further significance of Madame Koto's bar will be discussed.

III. ZAHRA'S IDENTITY

To understand the struggle that faces Zahra when she reaches physiological puberty, it is useful to build upon the analysis of the differences in masculine and feminine gender roles by looking at these differences in terms of subjectivity and agency. According to Freud and Lacan, the speaking subject is always masculine, whereas women (or 'woman', as Luce Irigaray specifies to emphasise that women are not allowed to be individual agents), speak with a masculine voice, or are merely objects. As women do not possess the phallic Word, they cannot speak as subjects, and cannot have true agency. Irigaray writes in *Speculum de l'autre femme*: 'Toute théorie du “sujet” aura toujours été appropriée au “masculin”. A s'y assujettir, la femme renonce à son insu à la spécificité de son rapport à l'imaginaire' (1974: 165). Thus, in the analysis of gender roles undertaken so far, a system of binary oppositions has been developed: subject/object, word/body, activity/passivity. In this system, women are associated with the second, 'inferior' terms. Zahra's identity is worthy of analysis, because her situation has forced her to experience all of these binary oppositions within herself.

A. PHYSIOLOGICAL PUBERTY

The paradox of Zahra's socially-recognized masculinity and biological femininity, which has been well-regulated by her father during her early years, cannot be sustained once Zahra reaches physiological puberty. Interestingly, the voice of the storyteller fades into the background at this important threshold of Zahra's development: the majority of her story of adolescence is told via journal entries, which draws the reader's attention to Zahra's own recognition of her (masculine) self as a social and, more importantly, paternal construct. This

*Though this interlude occurs near the end of FR, Azaro has not been shown to age into adolescence and must still be assumed to be a child, however latently and precociously sexual his behaviour appears; this will be seen in more detail at the end of this chapter.*
shift to Zahra’s own words also demonstrates her emergence as a speaking subject, which being named (and, interestingly, objectified) by the father has given her, as discussed in Chapter I. Grosz notes, the child ‘is now bound to the law, in so far as he is implicated in the symbolic “debt”, given a name, and an authorized speaking position’ (1990: 71). And yet, it will be seen that she does not pay back the ‘debt’ to her father for the name, but rather transgresses his Law by writing of her body’s betrayal.

Zahra’s transgression is not at first evident. The influence of Hadj Ahmed begun in early childhood continues and strengthens at this period of adolescence: ‘pris en main par le père, [Zahra] a dû passer des épreuves difficiles’ (ES 41). During this time, the ‘coiffeur venait régulièrement tous les mois lui couper les cheveux’ (34). This is, seemingly, the same ‘coiffeur’ who gave her her first haircut and ‘circumcised’ her. Now he ensures her conformity to her masculine role by his regular visits, the haircuts also act as a kind of repeated circumcision, cutting Zahra off from her femininity. Yet, at the same time, the haircuts are a symbolic replacement for the menstrual periods that are absolutely taboo. But, as with Zahra’s circumcision ritual, her blood is not shed, making these monthly haircuts poor substitutes. The other ‘épreuves difficiles’ to which her father subjects her are not mentioned in the text; rather, Zahra discovery of her body’s biological female development is the most difficult ordeal. Her identity at puberty is characterised by the tension between appearance and reality.

The realisation that her body is no longer conforming to her or her father’s will plunges Zahra into chaos, a sadness which ‘déarticule l’être, le détache du sol et le jette comme élément négligeable’ (44). Zahra’s very being is divided in her adolescence because the vision she has of herself does not conform to reality; she must confront the Other within herself. She finds that ‘Cette vérité, banale, somme toute, défait le temps et le visage, me tend miroir de je ne peux me regarder sans être troublé par une profonde tristesse’ (44). This distress is the growing discrepancy between Zahra’s public exterior and her nude self as seen in the mirror, manifested in her preoccupation with mirrors. Just as the ‘loi du père’ discussed in Chapter I evoked Lacan’s theory of the ‘nom du père’, Zahra’s references to mirrors evoke Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, which Grosz calls ‘the threshold of a number of ruptures or divisions which govern the child’s hitherto “natural” existence’ (1990: 32). There are two points of interest in this quotation. First, Zahra’s existence has, of course, never been ‘natural’: she has never been allowed to grow and develop at the pace and in the way natural to her. It should be remembered that, in North African Muslim culture, ‘differences in orientation and presentation of the self are seen as being part of the differences between male and female natures, not something that is socially or culturally induced’ (Platt 1988: 28). If this belief is accepted, it is clear that anything ‘innate’ to Zahra (as a biological female) must be repressed; she must be moulded into her father’s image. The texts do depict a society in which these beliefs are prevalent, but the reader is also able to perceive, as Butler argues, that ‘gender is also the
discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or a “natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive” (1990: 7). The repression of Zahra’s ‘natural sex’ is expressed physically, because her chest is bound from a very early age in the attempt to prevent breasts from developing, and she says that the ‘bande de tissu autour de la poitrine me serrait toujours’ (ES 37).

The second point of interest in Grosz’ comments is that Zahra is only forced to confront the ‘ruptures and divisions’ within herself fully when she reaches puberty and undergoes a second, slightly different mirror stage, when her body begins to look like the women’s in the hammam. Grosz notes that

The mirror stage relies on and in turn provides a condition for the body-image or imaginary anatomy, which in turn helps distinguish the subject from its world. By partitioning, dividing, representing, inscribing the body in culturally determinant ways, it is constituted as a social, symbolic, and regulatable body. (38)

At puberty, Zahra’s body is anything but regulatable. She perceives the inscription of cultural determination as a man, but also its negation in her bound breasts and lack of a penis. And yet, according to Lacan’s theory, there is potential liberation in this stage. Lacan

possits a divided, vacillating attitude that is incapable of a final resolution. This ‘divided’ notion of self and the problem of self-recognition are crucial in so far as they may explain processes of social inculcation and positioning. Neither ignorant nor aware of its own socialization, the child must be both induced to accept social norms and values as natural, and yet to function as an agent within a social world, an agent who has the capacity for rebellion and rejection of its predesignated social place. (Grosz 1990: 40)

However, as Zahra experiences both the ‘authorized speaking position’ of a man and the transgressive body of a woman, she is left confused about which identity to rebel against. With his ‘épreuves difficiles’, Hadj Ahmed attempts to induce her to accept masculine ‘social norms and values as natural’, and Zahra does this for a time, choosing to ‘éviter les miroirs’ (ES 44) and the rupture they present.

Like the child in the mirror phase, Zahra ‘experiences [her] body as fragmented’ (Grosz 1990: 34). This is because of the gap between the image of herself as male and the ‘reality’ that the mirror exposes, but there are also two symbolic representations of masculinity and femininity within her at puberty. It has been seen earlier that the voice represents the Law and Word of the Father, whilst the body is the dangerously sexualised representation of the mother, who is not permitted to have a voice of her own, nor to be anything but an object, rather than a subject of speech or desire. As Luce Irigaray argues, woman is the mirror in which men look for themselves:
Zahra, paradoxically, possesses both the dangerous feminine body and the authoritative masculine voice: she is simultaneously subject and object, as will be seen more explicitly in the discussion of Zahra's stint as a male-female impersonator later in this chapter. The advent of puberty reveals to Zahra this paradox; regarding her voice, she notes,

je suis et ne suis pas cette voix qui s'accommode et prend le pli de mon corps, mon visage enroulé dans le voile de cette voix, est-elle de moi ou est-ce celle du père qui l'aurait insufflée, ou simplement déposée pendant que je dormais en me faisant du bouche à bouche. (45)

Her words support the assessment in Chapter I of Hadj Ahmed as the sole creator of his child. She imagines her father literally giving her the 'kiss of life' and bequeathing upon her the voice that speaks the paternal law. As with the visits of the 'coiffeur', however, there is a slight inversion of Freudian discourse in this situation: The Other in Zahra's self should conventionally be all that is believed to be feminine, always the object and never the subject. As Irigaray argues, Woman is 'inachevée, inachevable, dans son statut ontologique. Jamais toute quant à sa forme propre. [...] La femme ne se résout jamais à/dans (l')être, qu'elle demeure coexistence simultanée des contraires. L'un et l'autre' (1974: 206). And yet, she sees the Other as her father and his voice, leaving space in the text for the subversion of patriarchal principles of masculinity and femininity. This small space is short-lived, however, and Zahra chooses to obey the voice. The gravity of living up to this voice and its rigid expectations causes her to say,

Je suis le dernier à avoir droit au doute. Non, cela ne n'est pas permis. La voix, grave, granulée, travaille, m'intimide, me secoue et me jette dans la foule pour que je la mérite, pour que je la porte avec certitude, avec naturel, sans fierté excessive, sans colère ni folie, je dois en maîtriser le rythme, le timbre et le chant, et la garder dans la chaleur de mes viscères. (45)

The verb 'maîtriser' is suggestive of the type of masculine power shown by Zahra's father in his plan to have a son. Even if Zahra's body betrays her, she must, if she is to retain any semblance of control over her social identity, 'master' her 'voice', which is actually her father's. This, itself, is a physical process and calls for an agreement of body and mind—to assume the masculine role, even to embody it in the 'chaleur de mes viscères'. The process is deeply risky:
La voix est ainsi: elle ne me trahit pas... et, même si je voulais la révéler dans sa nudité, la trahir en quelque sorte, je ne pourrais pas, je ne saurais pas et peut-être même que j'en mourrais. Ses exigences, je les connais: éviter la colère, les cris, l'extrême douceur, le murmure bas, bref l'irregularité. Je suis régulier. (45-6)

This passage demonstrates Zahra’s awareness of the ‘exigences’ of the masculine role, the Logos. She is bound not to betray it, thus she must show no emotions. To do so might expose her in two ways: first, to express emotion might make her voice betray its female origin; second, emotions, ‘douceur’ and ‘l’irrégularité’ are traditionally feminine traits. ‘Regularity’ is characteristic of the masculine to Zahra, emphasised by her use of the masculine form of the adjective. Thus, Zahra first resolves to inhabit to the full the ‘regulatable body’ that comes into being by the mirror stage, not the regular body that experiences the menstrual cycle and its female rhythms. However, the former is betrayed by the latter a few pages later in the text.

Zahra calls her own blood ‘une circoncision tardive’ (46). It is the first time that her own blood is shed; as suggested earlier, neither the circumcision ceremony nor the monthly haircuts can prevent menstruation. And yet, this ‘circoncision tardive’ does not confirm Zahra in her masculine role once and for all by fulfilling the function of a male circumcision; instead, it radically undermines it. This ‘tâche de sang’ acts to ‘ébranler la petite certitude, ou […] démentir l’architecture de l’apparence’ (46). The split between body and social role (architecture and appearance) becomes untenable. The onset of her period shows the ‘résistance du corps au nom’—not only the name of ‘male’, but the name of the Father, the Logos principle. The female body finally countermands the orders of the Father. Zahra’s shock at her first period is evident by her reaction. First she calls it a ‘circoncision tardive’ and then changes her view by writing, ‘Ce mince filet de sang ne pouvait être qu’une blessure. Ma main essayait d'arrêter l’écoulement’ (47). Though the ‘circoncision tardive’ may have been welcome if it made her able to carry the voice of the father, the ‘blessure’ is not welcome: she seeks to stop the blood flowing.

This ‘blessure’, like the image of mirrors, recurs throughout the texts and is consistently associated with the Feminine and female genitals. The wound is a ‘sorte de fatalité, une trahison de l’ordre’ (48). It also evokes the Freudian theory that all women are castrated men, with the vagina representing lack of a penis. In this way, Zahra’s wound is her vagina: her ‘castration’ occurs before birth when she is formed as a girl, though she does not fully recognise this until she reaches puberty. Freud writes that for young children, ‘there is as yet no question of male and female’; rather, ‘the antithesis here is between having a male genital and being castrated’ (1977: 312). Zahra’s reaction to her situation it itself a loss: her realisation that she is female necessarily coincides with her recognition that she is feminine, castrated, without a phallus. She muses, ‘Je suis souvent tenté d’organiser mon petit cimetière intérieur de sorte que
les ombres couchées se relèvent pour faire une ronde autour d'un sexe érigé, une verge qui serait mienne mais que je ne pourrais jamais porter ni exhiber' (ES 44). The 'sexe érigé' is undoubtedly the penis; penis envy takes on new significance in this context because Zahra has been raised as if she possessed one. Zahra is grieving for a 'lost' phallus; her grief still places it at the centre of her identity, as did her family. She sees her own centre, her womb, as a place of death, not life if it is only feminine and not filled with a phallus (i.e. a boy child for the mother; a male identity for Zahra). Yet she also has lost the life she could have had as a woman: 'C'était un rappel, une grimace d'un souvenir enfoui, le souvenir d'une vie que je n'avais pas connue et qui aurait pu être la mienne' (46). The two aspects of loss put her in a liminal situation, one of acute but lasting crisis. Its double aspect may be seen in Zahra's statement that 'Je vis des deux côtés du miroir' (57). The liminal position is also reflected in her imagery. She writes, 'Je me balançais dans un jardin, une terrasse en haut d'une montagne et je ne savais pas de quel côté je risquais de tomber' (46). This balance is precarious at best. She imagines 'une mosquée dans le désert, où les gens du crépuscule viennent déposer leur tristesse et offrir un peu de leur sang' (47). Zahra is already using the desert imagery which prefigures two important developmental stages in NS. The 'gens du crépuscule' are, like Zahra, neither one thing nor the other, neither creatures of day or night—neither the Sun generally associated with the masculine, nor the moon with the feminine. Like Zahra, they have sadness and blood to give. Zahra herself experiences the confusion between 'la nuit qui tomberait soudainement de ce ciel, ou le ciel qui chuterait en un morceau compact de cette nuit' (47). With the physiological changes out of her control, she seems to feel herself in a version of the 'dreaded interspaces' that Azaro must face with relation to the spirit world, as Chapter III will discuss. Zahra's response to the liminal crisis is a radical decision to reject her femininity.

B. DENIAL

In effect, the 'menarche' puts an end to Zahra's growing unrest at her transitional physical state. Remarkably, Zahra finds that, 'Après l’avènement du sang, je fus ramené à moi-même et je repris les lignes de la main telles que le destin les avait dessinées' (48). Her reaction to the distress of her situation is an extreme move in the opposite direction, thus a long period of oscillation begins. However, the 'self' to which she feels herself to be restored is the male self. Zahra denies her biology in order to seize both her 'destiny' and her male identity. But, this is another misconception, because her true destiny is counter to her male identity. She tells her mother:

5 There is also a connection made between the female body and the sepulchre by Hadj Ahmed, who says that, for once, when Zahra was conceived (physically) that her mother's body 'n'était plus une tombe' (NS 28), suggesting that the phallus is the only thing that can give the female body life when it conceives a male child.
As-tu vu mon corps? il a grandi; il a réintégré sa propre demeure..., je me suis débarrassé de l’autre écorce; elle était fragile et transparente. J’ai plâtré la peau. Le corps a grandi et je ne dors plus dans le corps d’un autre. (53)

Zahra’s choice of the word ‘écorce’ is particularly effective because, as a feminine noun, the significance of the phrase ‘elle était fragile et transparente’ is doubly significant; the self that she rejects is not masculine. She insists that she has banished the Other through her choice to ‘devenir sa propre volonté’ (48), though she is not fulfilling her own ‘volonté’ as much as acting out the social engineering of her as male.

The liminal stage of puberty and the intrusion of her female body are so severe that Zahra decides to take absolute control, much as her father did in the formation of his ‘son’. Like him, she is extreme in her interpretation: ‘Ahmed poussait la logique jusqu’au bout’ (51). Zahra asserts ‘Je m’approche du néant. [...] Je suis homme. Je m’appelle Ahmed selon la tradition de notre Prophète. [...] Père, tu m’as fait un homme, je dois le rester’ (51). This is further evidence of Zahra’s paternally-constructed identity. Just as she found in the hammam that any similarity between herself and the other women was ‘une dégénérescence inadmissible’ (36), she seeks to suppress all elements of doubt once she reaches puberty by imposing ‘regularity’ in the most masculine, authoritarian way:

Ahmed était devenu autoritaire. A la maison il se faisait servir par ses sœurs ses déjeuners et ses diners. Il se cloîtrait dans la chambre du haut. Il s’interdisait toute tendresse avec sa mère qui le voyait rarement. A l’atelier il avait déjà commencé à prendre les affaires en main. Efficace, moderne, cynique, il était un excellent négociateur. (51)

The success of ‘Ahmed’ in negotiation is hardly surprising, as this individual has been negotiating between two identities for her whole life, though not recognising it. Her desperation manifests itself in the implacability with which she denies any ‘feminine’ attribute such as tenderness or sympathy as well as any interaction with her mother; these are the emotions, ‘douceur’ and ‘irrégularité’ that must be avoided if she is to possess the male voice.

In this stage of denial, Zahra mentions the notion of play for the first time. This is significant, as it is a concept that shifts as her vision of her own identity shifts. She writes,

These questions that ‘n’ont pas de réponse’ may be read as the unsolvable riddle or paradox of her identity, an idea that will reappear in the Conclusion to the thesis. Though she claims not to be serious, her play is not light-hearted, and in fact she does not value any aspect of her femininity at this point in the texts. Play consists only of fooling the world and using others to her own ends, epitomised in her decision to marry her cousin Fatima.

There is little evidence at this point in the text that Zahra really is living both sides of the mirror, as she believes she has completely annihilated her femininity, showing that she is mistaken yet again. Yet, the vocabulary of the text still suggests liminality, despite Zahra’s own claims to be free of the ‘autre écorce’. The storyteller notes that ‘Justement Ahmed fera souvent des va-et-vient entre les deux portes’ because ‘tout dépend d’où on vient; c’est commodé de savoir que dans toute histoire il existe des portes d’entrées ou de sortie’ (49). Her wavering between a male or female identity, childhood or adulthood is manifested in her question, ‘suis-je un être ou une image, un corps ou une autorité, une pierre dans un jardin fané ou un arbre rigide?’ (50). These word-pairings seem at first glance to conform to the kinds of binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity discussed earlier, ‘un être’ and ‘une autorité’ may be read as masculine attributes, whilst ‘une image’ and ‘un corps’ are clearly feminine. However, the order of the terms is not consistent: it is masculine/feminine and then feminine/masculine. In addition, though the ‘arbre rigide’ suggests erect phallic masculinity, ‘une pierre dans un jardin fané’ is hardly conventionally feminine. Therefore, these oppositions suggest the confusion of Zahra’s identity. The response to her enigmatic questions may be seen in her ‘play’ with Fatima.

C. MARRIAGE

At the moment when Zahra rejects her femininity to insist that she has at last got rid of the Other, ES begins to present Zahra and the reader with doubles, characters who show similarities to Zahra or who cause her to question herself. In this way, Zahra’s self-perception is externalised. For example, Zahra’s psychic trauma, when repressed, manifests itself in the form of the unseen correspondent ‘qui n’existe […] peut-être pas’ (67). The correspondence acts as a dialogue about the state of gender and family relations in Morocco, but ends abruptly when the ‘épreuve décisive’ (62) of Hadj Ahmed’s death intervenes. It is also at this point that the narrative begins to fragment. The importance of this increasing fragmentation to Zahra’s own internal fragmentation will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter.

The most important double for Zahra in ES is Fatima, the epileptic cousin-wife. She appears initially as the person who will ensure Zahra’s masculinity. This is the most audacious of Zahra’s plans to have a ‘regular’ masculine existence and requires considerable thought. Zahra writes, ‘Au départ j’aimais la difficulté et la complexité de la situation’ (77). However, this initial security begins to erode: ‘Voulant l’utiliser pour parfaire mon apparence sociale, ce fut elle qui sut le mieux m’utiliser et faillit m’entraîner dans son profond désespoir’ (79). Like the ideal
passive woman, Fatima ‘ne parlait presque jamais, murmurait de temps en temps une phrase ou deux, s’enfermait dans un long silence, lisait des livres de mystiques et dormait sans faire le moindre bruit’ (77). This very silence troubles Zahra: Fatima, ‘cet être blessé’ (77), makes Zahra’s own ‘wound’ frighteningly real.

Ultimately, Zahra cannot fail to recognise the similarities between Fatima and herself: ‘C’était là mon miroir, ma hantise et ma faiblesse’ (77). Zahra, too, has ‘traversé un chemin pénible’ though Fatima has gone one step further than Zahra, ‘ayant accepté de tomber dans un précipice’ (77). Fatima, ‘en défigurant son être intérieur, le masquant, l’amputant, cette femme […] n’aspirait même pas à être un homme, mais à être rien du tout, une jarre creuse, une absence, une douleur étalée sur l’étendue de son corps et de sa mémoire’ (77). Part of being a ‘rien du tout’, in Zahra’s definition, is to have ‘depuis longtemps, annulé en elle toute sexualité’ (76). Fatima’s quest to be a ‘rien du tout’ pushes the logic of the way women are expected to behave ‘jusqu’au bout’, just as Zahra does in her adoption of the male persona. Self-annihilation, rejection of the physical body and absolute silence are the extreme result of the expectations of women in their society as defined by patriarchy. And yet, Zahra insists that the renunciation of desire means that Fatima ‘n’était plus une femme’ (77), showing a tension between the social expectation of women and Zahra’s own vision of real womanhood and laying the foundation for an eventual celebration of female desire. This suggests that beneath the tacit acceptance of ‘natural’ differences between men and women, the text is interrogating female destiny under patriarchy: Fatima is such an exaggerated version of the ideal, feminine woman that she is no longer a woman.

Fatima is not fooled by Zahra’s social identity and knows that she is a woman, wounded like herself and alienated from the rest of society. Fatima asserts:


This ‘terre stérile’ may be connected to the lack of sexuality that renders Fatima less than a woman. The word ‘blessure’ appears again as a reminder of women as castrated, wounded beings. Though Fatima and Zahra are extreme examples of ‘infirmity’, Fatima is wise enough to recognise that in their society it is almost inevitable to be ‘infirmes parce que femmes’. The common wound that these women share is two-fold: both the vagina that makes them failed, castrated men, and the further injury caused by being denied the only kind of femininity allowed to women in their society, that based on love and motherhood. Here again are two losses: in Freudian terms, the lack of a penis is to be mourned, but the text also strongly suggests that lack of (female) sexuality is also to be regretted, particularly when maternity cannot replace it.
Fatima eventually dies, unwilling to struggle to survive. Her death seems to free Zahra to make the inverse move toward life. Zahra’s fantasy of Fatima’s last words suggests that Zahra’s rebirth will result from an acceptance of her other, wounded self. Zahra writes, “beaucoup plus tard, une voix venue d’ailleurs dira: “Remange-moi, accueille ma difformité dans ton gouffre compatissant”” (81). The visceral, sexual imagery of the ‘gouffre’ suggests the mouth of the vagina and the womb, that Zahra previously rejected by calling it a ‘petit cimetière’. It is thus Zahra’s acknowledgement of her own sex and sexuality. It suggests that if Zahra will find a way to ingest Fatima’s pain, the ‘deformity’ of being a woman, that the birth from this impregnation or ingestion will be Zahra’s new self, a self that recognises itself as female without necessarily conforming to expectations of ‘natural’ differences between the sexes. This new self is also full of desire rather than distanced from it. Thus, this very important double provides Zahra with another way of seeing that allows her to begin to recreate her identity.

D, REBIRTH(S)

Fatima’s life and death have a profound effect on Zahra. As a result of the encounter, Zahra finds herself ‘en pleine mutation. Je vais de moi à moi en boitant un peu, en hésitant, trainant mes pas comme une personne infirme’ (99). That Zahra is like a ‘personne infirme’ suggests that her ‘ingestion’ of Fatima’s ‘difformité’ has been successful. This is a renewed and acknowledged liminal state between several identities, which allows Zahra to explore and long for an identity not based solely on sex or gender, role or archetype. She is battling strong social forces, however. In her society, ‘Être femme est une infirmité naturelle dont tout le monde s’accommode. Être homme est une illusion et une violence que tout justifie et privilégie’ (94). Considering the way gender and sexuality have pervaded every aspect of her existence since birth, it is no wonder that for her, ‘être tout simplement est un défi’ (94).

Zahra imagines a recovery that will be a ‘retour vers l’origine, vers les droits de la nature’ (90). Zahra’s fantasy of the return to the self, the female self that was denied from birth, the return to the ‘natural’ without reason or logic, is like Azaro’s desired return to the spirit world, to be discussed in Chapter III. Zahra desperately longs to ‘retrouver les premières sensations du corps qui ni la tête ni la raison ne contrôlent’ (96). She imagines a time preceding consciousness, a consciousness associated with social construction and distortion of ‘natural’ identity. Interestingly, this desired return both to the feminine and the unconscious conforms to patriarchal ideology. However, it is not clear that such a return would be possible, and when she visits the children’s village her ideas are challenged. This desire for rehabilitation of a pre-existing authentic identity will also be examined allegorically at the end of this chapter. Zahra wishes to ‘Respirer sans penser que je respire, à marcher sans penser que je marche, à poser ma main sur une autre peau sans réfléchir, et à têrir pour rien comme l’enfance émue par un simple rayon de lumière’ (99). She envisions a retreat from a difficult emergence into consciousness of
her divided self and feels that, ‘en fait je ne vais pas changer mais simplement revenir à moi, juste avant que le destin qu’on m’avait fabriqué ne commence à se dérouler et ne m’emporte dans un courant’ (111). Zahra proposes to reconfigure her existence in contradiction to the childhood and rituals she has already undergone. She will have the opportunity to do so in Ns, but will discover that despite her desire for a return to her origins, to the ‘innocence’ before social manoeuvring and manipulation, she still must contend with another kind of desire, physical desire which belies her ability to return to pre-conscious, sexually-innocent childhood.

This desire makes its first appearance in ES after Fatima’s death, when Zahra has shut herself away from the rest of the family and her duties as new ‘patriarch’ resulting from her father’s death. Zahra is deeply confused about her sexuality. She writes,

Ça me dégoûte, toutes ces images... Mes lèvres sont tellement pures qu’elles se retourneront le jour où elles se poseront sur d’autres lèvres... Pourtant, dans mes rêves, je ne vois que des lèvres charnues passer sur tout mon corps et s’arrêter longuement sur mon bas-ventre. (97)

There is ‘un désir que je ne peux nommer’ (88), just as her body at puberty was portrayed as ‘une vérité qui ne peut être dite’ (43). To name her desire or her female body would be for Zahra to use her ‘masculine' power to name her own transgression of the male order and to express threatening female sexuality. She retrospectively explains in NS,

J’avais passé mon adolescence à repousser de toutes mes forces le désir. J’étais piégée mais je tirais de cette situation assez de bénéfice. J’avais fini par ne plus penser au désir. Je n’y avais pas droit. Je me contentais de mes rêves délirants, peuplés de phallus, de corps d’éphèbes et de banquets vulgaires. Il m’arrivait souvent de calmer mon corps moi-même et d’en avoir honte. (137)

To think of desire is forbidden to Zahra because of her divided identity. As a woman, she does not have the right to be a desiring subject, especially because she has had a stolen phallus. Zahra has by no means reached stasis in ES. She is still very much in a liminal state in which she is not yet ready to make a definitive step over and through the threshold into a feminine social identity: ‘Voilà que le doute commence à entrer comme une lumière crue, vive, insupportable. Je tolérerai l’ambiguïté jusqu’au bout, mais jamais je ne donnerai le visage dans sa nudité à la lumière qui approche’ (106). The recurrence of the phrase ‘jusqu’au bout’ demonstrates Zahra’s extraordinary consciousness of boundaries: those set for her by her father, by society, and those she places on herself. In her transformation into a woman inside and out, she finds with some disturbance that she must have ‘dépass[ée] les limites que je m’étais imposées’ (111). However, she comes to revel in this position of being ‘hors limites’, and spends her time in isolation in her house beginning to heal the rupture between subject and
CHAPTER II: GENDER ROLES AND SEXUALITY

object, self and other, 'autorité' and 'image' that the mirror had previously revealed to her.

When she looks in the mirror at her body, she finds that 'Une buée se forma sur la glace et je me vis à peine. J’aimais cette image trouble et floue; elle correspondait à l’état où baignait mon âme' (115). Though Zahra’s healing is effected in front of the mirror, she is not achieving it through her gaze, but through touch: ‘Ces caresses devant le miroir devinrent une habitude, une espèce de pacte entre mon corps et son image, une image enfouie dans un temps lointain et qu’il fallait réveiller en laissant les doigts toucher à peine ma peau’ (116). This important shift from gaze to touch presages Zahra’s later relationship with the blind Consul. Zahra’s journey becomes a conscious quest for identity, a willingness, after all, to show her face in the ‘ nudité de la lumière’, as she cannot understand herself in isolation. Her experience at the ‘cirque forain’ is yet another expression of Zahra’s continuing liminality.

i. THE ‘CIRQUE PORAIN’

Zahra’s quest for identity causes her to leave her familiar surroundings. The next boundary she must cross is the physical threshold of her home, bringing into play the public/private dichotomy of the proper roles for men and women. Though her traditional sphere as a woman should be the home, she cannot fully develop as a woman in isolation; she is looking for recognition. She finds that ‘il fallait rééduquer les émotions et repudier les habitudes. Ma retraite n’a pas suffi; c’est pour cela que j’ai décidé de confronter ce corps à l’aventure, sur les routes, dans d’autres villes, dans d’autres lieux’ (112). Zahra’s travels lead her to the ‘cirque forain’, where she receives her female name for the first time. The female impersonator currently with the company has decided to leave, and Zahra is asked to take his place. A brief look at female impersonation by men will contextualise Zahra’s male impersonation at the fair.

When Bou Chaïb takes on the role of a woman, he dominates the other men and makes them look ridiculous; a woman would not be permitted to do the same. For the crowd watching him, titillation comes with the degradation of women because proving male superiority sexually and
socially is exciting. Impersonation is the best way to achieve this. Woman is an object, and, according to Irigaray, ‘bien sûr ce qui compte n’est pas l’existence de l’objet—comme tel il est indifferent—mais le simple effet d’une représentation sur le sujet, sa réflexion donc dans l’imagination de l’homme’ (1974: 258). The ‘imagination de l’homme’ is stimulated in a different way by Zahra, who joins the fair as a male impersonator, who then reveals herself to be a woman. As such, this performance reflects Zahra’s real life.

Zahra receives this female name for the first time in this episode. She is named by the old woman who runs the show with her son, who ‘m’appela Zahra “Amirat Lhob”, princesse d’amour’ (123). Just like the other naming incidents in Zahra’s life, this one is unsuccessful in granting a name that accurately defines her. This name is not meant to do so, however. Rather, it is a stage name, meant to announce her allure to the paying male public. Indeed, her job at the travelling circus belies the stability of any gender-specific name, because Zahra goes to work there as a male impersonator. The storyteller himself notes that he ‘ne sai[t] comment le nommer’ (126)—male or female, Ahmed or Zahra. Abbas, the son of the old woman, tells Zahra that at the circus, ‘Tout est faux, et c’est ça notre truc, on ne le cache pas; les gens viennent pour ça’ (120). Thus, any identity that Zahra assumes here is also suspect, as is her reaction to being forced into the show. She says, ‘Je jouais et suivais les ordres’ (123): Zahra is both playing by the old woman’s rules and, more importantly, playing with her own identity and the expectations of her (predominantly male) audience.6

In terms of Zahra’s identity, this stint at the ‘cirque forain’ suggests that she is playing with expectations of women and men and with her own identity. In this incident she comes closer to being able to live ‘des deux côtés du miroir’ (57) than she does at any earlier point in the text. She tries to convince that she is a man in the first part of her act, but then transgresses all boundaries of propriety by unveiling her female body before men. Once off the stage, she lives quietly and joins the sleeping quarters of the ‘gamins acrobates qui étaient très discrets’ (121). The univocal, coherent account of her life breaks down completely at this time, leaving the reader unsure by the end of the text what has actually happened to Zahra. More will be said on this point both at the end of this chapter and in the Conclusion. However, Zahra’s journey continues in NS, when she is given the opportunity to act out her fantasy of a ‘retour vers l’origine’ and childhood first mentioned in her experience of the ‘mirror stage’ discussed earlier.

ii. THE CHILDREN’S VILLAGE

Early in NS, Zahra visits a village inhabited solely by children. This experience, which is never definitively established as dream or reality, challenges Zahra’s idea of a return to a ‘natural’, ‘innocent’ childhood; it is also important as a site of rebirth, the threshold to a new

identity. From longing for a simple, ‘pure’ identity, she comes to seek acceptance of and love for her female form.

The incident occurs in a chapter entitled ‘le jardin parfumé’. The use of this phrase is significant for several reasons. First, the link to myth is explicit because the ‘jardin parfumé’ is like the Garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were expelled when they recognised their own sexuality. Zahra is seeking a return to a world before culture and consciousness intervened in her self-perception. This seems to be the inevitable consequence of her particular kind of mirror stage, which

impels [the child] nostalgically to see out a past symbiotic completeness, even if such a state never existed and is retrospectively imposed on the pre-mirror phase; and to seek an anticipatory or desired (ideal of future) identity in the coherence of the totalized specular image. (Grosz 1990: 39)

The term ‘jardin parfumé’ has also been previously used to describe the transformation of Zahra’s mother on the night of Zahra’s conception. Hadj Ahmed notes, ‘Pour une nuit, le corps de ta mère n’était plus une tombe, ou un ravin froid. Sous la chaleur de mes mains, il fut ranimé, il devint un jardin parfumé’ (28). The connection to any assumption of childhood and emphasises through the image of the tomb changing to a womb (because Zahra is conceived on this night) the symbolism of the village as a site of rebirth and sensual awakening for Zahra. Though she seeks renewal, she does not orchestrate it; she is ‘enlevée comme dans les contes anciens’ (38). However, she is not anxious: ‘j’étais comme une enfant qui faisait son premier voyage’ (42). This is interesting on a symbolic level because a child’s first ‘journey’ is the passage from the womb to the world, further emphasising the element of rebirth to the experience. It is an idealised image of this ‘first voyage’, however. Azaro, who actually can remember all of his physical births notes that ‘Each new birth was agony for us too, each shock of the raw world’ (FR 5). The village represents Zahra’s fantasies of a ‘symbiotic completeness’ or a ‘natural existence’ that she has never experienced. The longing for such an existence may be seen in her comments early in NJ: ‘J’ai été une enfant à l’identité trouble et vacillante’ (6). This troubled identity is contrasted with the idea of ‘l’enfance, je veux dire cette innocence dont j’ai été privée’ (6). The children’s village provides her an opportunity to recapture this innocence. That she has suffered in the past makes her fit perfectly with the other children she finds in the village: ‘Ici, ce qui nous est commun c’est que nous venons tous d’une souffrance, d’une injustice; nous avons la chance d’arrêter le temps et de réparer les dégâts’ (43). Yet it shall be seen that the arrested development of these children is what ultimately forces Zahra to leave.
The children in the village seem to have an innate wisdom which allows them to live in harmony, innate principles which allow them to organise the village successfully. Zahra notes that


There are no troubled or competing roles or identities here. Zahra is free not only from the 'loi du père' in the village, but from all written laws, conventions and expectations, as well as their enforcement—there are no authority figures to ensure that she conform to the masculine or feminine ideal.

At first there are no apparent gender distinctions among the children, nor any sexuality displayed by them. Indeed, Zahra is told that the 'problème' of sexuality 'n’existe pas' in the village because 'Nous sommes enfants et nous le restons. C'est simple; c'est commode' (43). However, what Zahra discovers in the village is her own body and its sexuality. Though as a child she was frightened of the vaginas of the women in the hammam, in the children’s village she remembers a woman from her childhood who ‘avait des seins immenses. ça débordait de partout. Je me suis mise à rêver de cette abondance, de ce bien d’Allah, de ces quantités de chair et de glandes’ (45). Zahra’s perspective has altered so significantly that she perceives goodness and even godliness in breasts, particularly her own. She ‘touchait mes seins’ and ‘retirait’ mon saroual puis ma culotte pour faire plaisir au vent, pour me faire plaisir et sentir la main légère et froide de cette brise matinale passer sur mon ventre et réveiller mes sens’ (45).

The ‘touch’ of the wind takes the place of the self-touch with which she experimented in front of the mirror in ES: both are intended to ‘réveiller [ses] sens’, in preparation for the touch of a man. In this scene, Zahra even ‘baptises’ herself in a mountain lake, but gives herself no name. Not only has she learned to ‘marcher naturellement’ (44), she feels that her body ‘qui était une image plate, déserté, dévasté, accaparé par l’apparence et le mensonge, rejoignait la vie’ (46). Thus, in one sense she has regained her ‘natural’ form and learned to celebrate it, instead of mourning the lost penis. The image of the ‘wound’ is nowhere to be found in this passage; she has moved beyond the ‘difformité’ of traditional femininity and this revalorisation of the female form paves the way for the reclamation of her desire.
Yet, despite this positive experience, Zahra senses that ‘le malheur rôdait autour de nous; le rêve était trop beau; le cauchemar n’allait pas tarder à se manifester’ (48). She is expelled from the village because she is ‘trempe dans le temps’ (49), unable and unwilling to stop her own development. The ‘retour vers l’origine’ is not sustainable. Thus, though she has benefited from being able to celebrate her female form, the seeming ‘purity’ of the children in their asexual paradise is shown to be false; this end to the visit then also calls into question undermined, also undermining Zahra’s newfound love of the female body, as her reaction to the event is to state, ‘Je voulais oublier et croire que ce qui venait de m’arriver n’était qu’une hallucination de plus, un rêve interrompu où tout se mélangeait’ (50). Thus, though Zahra has seemed to surrender fully to her ‘natural’ female identity, she has actually not completed her transformation or come to terms with the complexities of her new identity.

Zahra’s exile by the children does lead to her final rejection of her masculine role, as her first action after leaving it is to bury the tokens of her masculine identity in her father’s grave. This important event will be revisited in Chapter III, because Azaro, too, buries the tokens of his spirit identity. At Hadj Ahmed’s grave, Zahra says ‘quelque chose comme ‘Salut!’ ou ‘Adieu gloire fatique, à nous deux la vie, l’âme nue, blanche, vierge, le corps neuf même si la parole est ancienner’ (57). In this important moment, the body/Word dichotomy repeatedly seen in her development earlier in the chapter is to some extent resolved: she can accept the pure body despite the Word. Her surrender to the moment and the act of leaving behind her early life is an enormous relief, allowing her to travel ‘en paix avec moi-même’ (58). This peace is contingent on the continued burial of her past:

\[
\text{le seul fait d’avoir renoncé à tout et d’être partie avec la ferme volonté de ne plus revenir, le fait d’avoir coupé avec le passé et ses traces, dégageait mon esprit de la peur. J’étais décidée à enfermer mon passé dans un coma profond, à le dissoudre dans une amnésie totale. Sans regret, sans remords. J’aspirais à une nouvelle naissance dans une peau vierge et propre. (59)}
\]

These remarks make her quest for a new identity explicit, and support the interpretation that she is in a liminal state—detached from the old identity, but not yet reborn into the new one. It is also significant that Zahra is making her own choices about her identity, affirming herself as a subject, a female subject, who expresses agency, something she never really experienced when masquerading as a man. This decision to bury the past in a ‘coma profond’ is, however, problematic. Her wish for a new virginity and cleanliness still suggests a discomfort with sexual

7 A fascinating comparison could be made between this children’s village and the children’s island portrayed in Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Trans. Michael Henry Heim, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981. In both texts, the protagonist who goes to the children’s community has expectations of children as asexual and innocent that are more or less radically subverted by the ‘reality’ they find there, though the reality of the communities themselves is also deeply suspect in each text.
desire. An unsettling experience in the forest following this declaration emphasises this uneasiness.

Zahra’s ‘peau vierge et propre’ does not last long, as she is raped in the forest by a stranger. In this sexual experience, she is the focus, indeed the object, of another’s desire. As such, she is free: ‘je n’avais ni la force ni l’envie de résister. Je ne pensais pas; j’étais libre sous le poids de ce corps fiévreux’ (62). Her passive acceptance of the rape, indeed her complicity with it because she senses what will happen but does nothing to stop it, seems merely to confirm patriarchal notions of femininity. Zahra’s identity is still oscillating and she remains deeply conflicted about the nature of desire and her own relation to it, insisting that she is not traumatised by the rape: ‘Je me posais toutes [les] questions et je ne cherchais pas vraiment à vérifier quoi que ce soit. Je ne sais même plus aujourd’hui si cette rencontre dans le dos m’avait procuré du plaisir ou du dégoût’ (63). In effect, the answer is not important because she has once again detached herself from her body, pushing her control ‘jusqu’au bout’ yet again. She asserts:

La rencontre dans le bois avait été brutale et aveugle. Ce souvenir n’était empreint d’aucun sentiment ou jugement. Pour moi ce fut une péripétie parmi tant d’autres que je vécus sans dramatisation. Les choses devaient traverser mon corps sans laisser de blessures. J’avais décidé cela en toute sérénité. (80)

The blindness of the encounter does not relieve it of its brutality. Also brutal, or at least harsh, is Zahra’s insistence that her body will not show any ‘blessures’, the word in its plural form suggesting not merely a lack of a penis, but rather all of the consequences of her double life. Her struggle must take place ‘en silence, sans rien laisser apparaître’ (85). Zahra is trapped in a liminal impasse between her two identities. She longs to

sortir une fois pour toutes de ce labyrinthe malsain. Je me battais contre la culpabilité, contre la religion, contre la morale, contre les choses qui menaçaient de resurgir, comme pour me compromettre, me salir, me trahir, et démolir le peu que j’essayais de sauvegarder dans mon être. (85)

This time it is not her femininity that compromises her, but her past, the knowledge of her ‘vie trafiquée’ (80). Her attempts to leave the ‘labyrinthe malsain’ are aided by her relationship with the Consul, in which she is able to reconfigure her identity, to see and be seen in a way that does not entail objectification for either.

iii. ‘THE CONSUL’

Like Fatima and the unseen correspondent in E3, the Consul may be read as a kind of double of Zahra: on several occasions he makes reference to their similarity. His ‘wound’ does
not relate to his sexuality, but he is marginalised to a certain extent within the community because he is blind. The Consul introduces the theme of visibility in the text, suggesting that there are different kinds of vision. It will be seen that this blindness is important to Zahra in two ways. The first is that though the material world is barred to the Consul visually, like Tiresias he possesses a startling insight into Zahra's character and, as Chapter III will show, a kind of spirit world; the second is that his blindness ensures that he cannot 'penetrate' her with his male, objectifying gaze. Therefore, the sexual politics in their relationship is significantly different from their society's conventional model. Therefore, it is in loving relationship with this man, respecting his otherness and having hers respected in return, that Zahra is able to exit the 'labyrinthe malsain'.

The Consul's 'caresses lentes et douces recomposaient mon image' (137). The Consul's touch forges a connection with Zahra; she is not a visual object in this relationship. His blindness allows her to be the person she wishes, without forcing her to resolve the paradox of her liminal identity. In fact, their first sexual encounter takes place under the pretense that Zahra is a whore in a brothel. Zahra 'savai[t] qu'il n'était pas dupe' but she préférai[t] laisser le doute entourer ce qui était arrivé cet après-midi. Une complicité liait nos corps dans le silence et le secret' (126). This complicity though it derives from something forbidden, transgressive and taboo (both their shared sexuality and its expression in the brothel) becomes a delightful secret between them. The silence becomes the product of something too good to be spoken rather than something shameful or taboo as in the male hammam seen earlier. Zahra says:

J'avais l'impression que nous nous étions volontairement enfermés dans un crypte et que nous étions nous-mêmes un secret à garder. Il y a des moments intenses où seule une présence suffit et on ne sait pas pourquoi quelque chose de puissant et parfois de déterminant se produit. On ne peut le nommer. Seule l'émotion le trahit pour des raisons obscures et on s'en trouve chargé et heureux comme un enfant qu'une joie transporte dans un monde merveilleux. (128)

The use of the word 'volontairement' is the key to the positive qualities of her relationship with the Consul. By choosing not to name the 'quelque chose', and by discovering that it is a 'présence' rather than an 'image' that suffices is a choice against the masculine Logos principle that names and objectifies; the silence is not passivity, but respect of otherness. This silence is in complete contrast with the shame associated with the 'vérité qui ne peut être dite' (ES 43) and the 'désir que je ne peux nommer' (88), seen earlier. Because of her relationship with the Consul, she finds that she 'n'était[t] plus un être de sable et de poussière à l'identité incertaine,

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8The text does not explicitly suggest that the Consul is a Tiresias-like figure, but it is an interesting comparison, as Tiresias knows what it is to be both man and woman, and would therefore be understanding of Zahra. Certainly, the Consul does not express a masculinity of the type that Hadj Ahmed represents.
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s’effritant au moindre coup de vent’ (NS 138). In terms of identity, not only is Zahra not appropriated by the Consul, but she is able to re-evaluate and reconfigure her own identity through this relationship. She has managed to reject the elements of her identity that hampered her and has negotiated her own balance between appearance and reality:

Je n’étais plus cet être de vent dont toute la peau n’était qu’un masque, une illusion faite pour tromper une société sans vergogne, basée sur l’hypocrisie, les mythes d’une religion détournée, videe de sa spiritualité, un leurre fabriqué par un père obsédé par la honte qu’agite l’entourage. Il m’avait fallu l’oubli, l’erreur et la grâce distillé par l’amour, pour renaitre et vivre. (138)

Zahra compares herself both to an ‘être de sable’ and an ‘être de vent’, emphasising the instability of her former identity. This instability of her former life is not truly liberating because she does not, as sand or wind, have the choice over her destination; this contrasts sharply with the ‘voluntary enclosure’ she experiences with the Consul. The image of ‘wind’ will reappear in Chapter III, as Azaro, too, finds himself without control over the boundaries of his subjectivity.

However, this seeming rebirth is no more real or lasting than those she has previously experienced. Like the rape, which occurs to challenge Zahra’s reclaimed love of her female body, Zahra’s experience in prison, which interrupts her relationship with the Consul, contains elements that seem to punish her for the relationship.

E. PRISON

Zahra’s attempts to bury her past have a literal significance, because when her uncle discovers her at the Assise’s house and proposes to torment her, she kills him and is sent to prison. This prison experience has its benefits and its traumas. While there, she learns ‘combien ma vie d’homme déguisé ressemblait à une prison. J’étais privé de liberté dans la mesure où je n’avais droit qu’à un seul rôle. Hors ces limites c’était la catastrophe’ (143). Her views have changed so much that she no longer wishes to have only one role; certainly her relationship with the Consul allowed her space to play with her identity. At first, then, her prison experience is not negative.

However, a disturbing incident throws Zahra into chaos. She is visited by five of her sisters, who take revenge on her for usurping a male role: Zahra is forced to undergo a ‘real’ circumcision; her clitoris is removed, her vagina sewn up, and her blood shed. Though the sisters claim that it is Zahra’s betrayal of her true identity that inspires their vengeance, the timing of the incident also strongly suggests that Zahra is being punished for her sexual desire; as seen earlier, open female sexuality in her culture is threatening and must be contained. Though female circumcision is not a traditional practice in North Africa, it is the most effective way to blight Zahra’s sexuality. This event again places her in the ‘labyrinthe malsain’: ‘Mon
corps s'était arrêté dans son évolution; il ne muait plus, il s'étéignait pour ne plus bouger et ne plus rien ressentir; ni un corps de femme plein et avide, ni un corps d'homme serein et fort; j'étais entre les deux, c'est-à-dire en enfer' (178). This liminal state is the result of the circumcision and the deprivation of the Consul's touch. Choice ceases to be available to her and she recognises that 'L'enfer était en moi, avec son désordre, ses hallucinations et sa démente' (181). The examination of Zahra's identity is further advanced in two 'dream' sequences.

F. VISIONS OF LIMINALITY AND PLAY IN ZAHRA'S IDENTITY

Two of Zahra's 'dream' sequences are important to showing her relationship to sexuality and its evolution: both involve a pilgrimage to a kind of saint of fertility. However, in the first one, Zahra is herself the saint, in the second it is the Consul.

i. LA SAINTE

The vision begins with nameless women, walking across the desert in silence since sunrise. They are going toward a 'lieu mythique, source de toute lumière' (179). Their time of arrival is liminal, similar to the 'gens du crépuscule' whom Zahra mentions in *ES*. The women must arrive 'juste au moment où la lumière se fait douce et ambiguë, au moment où elle éloigne le soleil et rejoint le ciel au seuil de la nuit. Il fallait arriver juste à cet instant dont la durée est indéterminée' (179). The indeterminacy of the moment allows transformation; it is a liminal moment. The women are obedient to the conditions of their quest:

Celles qui faisaient le voyage ne posaient pas de question. Elles savaient qu'elles devaient arriver au moment où la lumière assure le passage du jour à la nuit. C'était une des conditions pour que leur démarche auprès de la Sainte soit acceptée. (179-80)

Zahra is revealed to be this 'Sainte', 'la Sainte des sables, fille de lumière, dont les mains avaient la grâce et le pouvoir d'arrêter l'irrémissible, d'empêcher le malheur et peut-être même d'éloigner définitivement la stérilité du corps des jeunes femmes' (180). These powers seems to derive from her own near-miraculous transformation from the 'stérilité' of her masculine identity, to the fullness of her feelings for the Consul.

The symbolic importance of the episode is signalled by the arrival of a supplicant who is nothing like the other silent, obedient women: This figure is unidentifiable; it has a 'visage qui essayait de se dissimuler' (182). Indeed, the first things she notices is not the face, but that 'Le ventre nu qui se présenta à moi était poilu. Ma main descendit un peu et rencontra un membre en érection' (18). The erection is important, signifying as it does male desire and phallic potency. Yet, he asks Zahra to 'rends-moi mon souffle, ma vie, redonne-moi la force d'être un homme' (182), an inversion of the scene in which Zahra imagines her father breathing a male voice into her. This suggests that he is a vision of her male self, whose breath and being she has denied in favour of her conception of a female identity. The figure cannot be the Consul, as his...
gaze ‘me dévisageait’ rather than recomposes her face, and causes ‘une douleur dans le ventre, puis le vide, un vide persistant’ (182). She does not choose to give new life to this male figure, however, and her experience of the ‘vide persistant’ in her belly suggests yet another loss of a phallus.

This experience leaves her recognising that she is ‘une défaite et je marchais seule sur une route dallée de marbre où je risquais de tomber’ (183). This risk is similar to that which she experiences in one of her earlier liminal stages when she has her first period. In fact, the phrasing is exactly the same; she does not know on which side she ‘risquai[t] de tomber’. The repetition suggests the circularity of liminality, though she has seemingly made ‘progress’ between the earlier stage and this. Zahra finds this liminal state, into which she has been plunged without her consent, to be threatening and frightening, as well as exciting: ‘je réalisai que j’étais en train de sortir de moi-même, que cette mise en scène devait aboutir à ce départ dans un corps dévasté’ (183). ‘Aboutir’ refers to goals, a destination, the end result of a situation. However, for Zahra, this seeming destination is another ‘départ’: her liminality is continual. She is not given the answer to her plea, ‘mais où est l’issue, où est la fin?’ (183) because she reaches the culmination of one state and immediately begins another. This is not liberating for her at this point in the text, but rather, is the ‘shadow side’ of liminality which, as Langdon Elsbree writes, ‘is unchosen, unwanted, unexpected, more notable for the ways it isolates, desolates, at times terrorizes’ (1991: 20). Zahra has been terrorised by her visions and the pain inflicted by her sisters. When she confronts this, she is able to transform her liminality into one that is more empowering. She comes to believe that

il me fallait passer par cette épreuve pour me détacher de ces images. Il fallait rappeler à mon corps et à mes sens le lieu de mon enfermement et que c’était illusoire de s’en échapper par des rêves qui devenaient des cauchemars. Si l’âme était écorchée, le corps ne pouvait plus mentir. [...] Ma nuit fut longue et belle. Aucune image ne vint l’interrompre. (184-5)

Her freedom from her visions is mirrored by the events of the new chapter a page later: she is released from prison for good behaviour. However, the vision upon which the text and her story close is not a rejection of liminality.

ii. LE SAINT

As with many episodes in Zahra’s life, the account of her release from prison is deliberately ambiguous; it is impossible to tell whether or not this experience ‘really’ happens. The effects of such ambiguity on the reader will be discussed in detail in the Conclusion, as it leads the reader herself to experience a kind of liminal state. Zahra does not try to rationalise events; she accepts what is presented to her.
Zahra's re-entry to society is characterised by the kind of play she began to cultivate with the Consul: ‘je portais une djellaba d’homme. Sa laine était épaisse et rugueuse. Mes cheveux étaient noués dans un joli foulard de couleurs vives. Je me mis du rouge sur les lèvres et du khôl autour des yeux’ (187). Zahra is again balancing between two identities: she is wearing masculine clothes and feminine make-up. However, this time it does not seem as if she is in danger of falling on either side. Rather, upon looking in a mirror, she discovers that, ‘Mon visage reprenait lentement vie. Il s’illuminait de l’intérieur. J’étais heureuse et légère. Avec ma djellaba de camionneur j’avais l’air étrange et drôle’ (187). She is not disconcerted by her strangeness, nor worried about the reaction of her fellow bus passengers. She has achieved a measure of wholeness, that allows her to play with societal expectations.

The realistic description of Zahra’s journey becomes more enigmatic when she `avançait dans la brume. Je ne voyais pas plus loin que quelques mètres’ (187). The motif of myopia appears in this scene to signal both Zahra’s and the reader’s lack of certainty about what is taking place, but also prefigures the return of the blind Consul. Zahra’s spatial location also reflects her social location: ‘En regardant en arrière j’avais l’impression d’être cernée par une ceinture de brume, enveloppée d’un voile blanc qui me séparait du reste du monde’ (187). This separation is not disturbing to her, instead, she feels ‘cloîtrée dans cette solitude heureuse qui précède un grand événement’ (187). The separation from the rest of the world also prepares her for her next, ‘final’ liminal stage or rite of passage, the ‘grand événement’. Despite her feeling of good will, she is again attacked by ‘une lumière forte, presque insoutenable’ (187). The bright light leaves her ‘comme nue. Plus rien ne m’enveloppait ni me protégeait’ (188). She is vulnerable and naked, like a newborn, suggesting that she is on the verge of yet another rebirth.

Her spatial position as she moves toward a ‘maison toute blanche’ (188) is again significant: ‘Devant moi, la mer. Derrière moi les sables’ (188). She is leaving the ‘sables’ behind her, the identity composed of sand that gave her no power, and the lack of fertility represented by the desert location of her previous vision. Before her is the sea, source of all primordial life and a powerful symbol of femininity (Neumann 1963: 47).

The ambiguity of the experience is emphasised because Zahra recognises a praying woman as the Assise, who, according to the Consul’s letters, has supposedly died. Zahra finds herself ‘sous l’emprise de quelque magie’ (189), but does not try to escape. Indeed, at this point, ‘tout devenait clair dans mon esprit’ (189), and she understands both her own identity and the nature of death, as Chapter III will show. However, though everything is clear in her mind, when the Consul appears as the Saint he is ‘tout de blanc vêtu, il était voilé et portait des lunettes noires’ (189), emphasising the contrasts between optical vision or visibility and a deeper insight. In this vision, Zahra is the unexpected visitor to appear before the Saint; ‘A mon tour je me levai et me mis dans la file des femmes’ (189). However, even at this weighty moment of reunion with the Consul, Zahra is able to choose liminality and play: ‘Puis, j’eus envie de jouer,
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je rejoignis la file des hommes. Avec ma djellaba je pouvais passer pour un homme' (189). This action is of extreme significance to the potentially liberating qualities of liminality for a person who manages to create a strong sense of personal identity. Liminality is dangerous when it is imposed by others and when it appropriates the individual's identity. Zahra's decision shows that she is in control of her identity, and thus has the room to 'play' and the desire to do so. When she reaches the Consul, she further transgresses the expected respect and veneration of a saint: 'je pris sa main tendue et, au lieu de la baiser, je la léchai, suçant chacun de ses doigts' (189). This sexual imagery shows Zahra's ability to desire another rather than passively accepting to be an object of desire for another. The Consul's initial reaction is to try to withdraw his hand, but when he hears her voice, one which no longer speaks the word of the father, but which has found its true home in her feminine body, he responds with 'Enfin, vous voilà!' (189). Zahra has finally managed to heal the rupture between her masculine and feminine identities, which the Consul's comment seems to recognise.

III. ZAHRA'S LIMINAL IDENTITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

In order to pull together the threads of the analysis of Zahra's sexual identity, it is useful to return to Stuart Hall's definition of identity as used in the Introduction. His definition accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (1996:3-4)

Zahra's identity, as has been shown, is in a constant state of transformation and does not rely on an unchanging unity of elements. She is liberated by her choice of how to construct her identity in the face of the 'often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions', though she often uses traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity as her reference points. The 'radical historicization' of her identity will be examined below with reference to her life as an allegory for Morocco.

A. THE POTENTIAL SPACE

Zahra's quest for identity may also be usefully examined in the light of D.W. Winnicott's analysis of the 'search for the self', for which 'certain conditions' are necessary (1971: 54). He notes that 'it is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self' (54). Zahra's 'play' is her creative strategy for constructing her own identity, without reliance on either biology or social expectation. Winnicott analyses play
through a spatial location called the 'potential space' in which play is possible. This potential space is a liminal space, between two other spaces—'personal or psychic reality' and the 'actual world' (103). Winnicott asserts that, while the potential space is 'a highly variable factor (from individual to individual)', the other two locations 'are relatively constant, one being biologically determined and the other being common property' (103). Zahra's choice of the liminal potential space is significant because she draws on elements from the two other, more stable locations, whilst embracing the creative instability of the potential space. It is in this way that it is most valuable to assess her development.

This established, it is now possible to begin a discussion of the implications of her choice for postcolonial studies, first by looking at other readings of the texts that have focused on their postcolonial implications.

B. POSTCOLONIAL ALLEGORY IN THE FRENCH TEXTS

As suggested in Chapter I, Zahra's life may be read as an allegory of the nation, in part because of the newspaper announcement placed by her father that explicitly invites such a reading. Critics have undertaken to do so in various ways; the most prevalent is to read the oppression and repression of Zahra's femininity as symbolic of the oppressive and repressive strategies of colonisation on the 'authentic' identity of the colonised. The link between the feminine body and the colonised land (and its inhabitants) is helpfully outlined by Anne McClintock, who notes that 'All too often colonials represented the colonized landscape as feminine, unknowable and unrepresentable' (1995: 193). In other words, both the feminine body and (soon to be) colonised lands are represented as a 'dark continent'. Thus, in the context of ES and NS, Zahra's body and identity are colonised and manipulated by her father's law, just as Morocco was colonised by France and forced to alter radically its concept of identity.

In the light of such an interpretation, Lisa Lowe reads Zahra's decision, her 'transvestism' at the 'cirque forain' in ES as a strategy of resistance to such colonisation. This is because there are two forms of transvestism: the first is that imposed by her father who forces her socially to wear male clothes; the second is Zahra's chosen transvestism, that puts such an act on the stage. Lowe writes:

Ahmed/Zahra devises an alternative transvestism, one which does not comply with the father's enforced transvestism, which expressed the power of men over women under patriarchy, but which is rather a representation of cross-dressing which both exhibits this logic of forced transvestism, and ultimately makes use of further cross-dressing to deride the patriarchal logic. (1993: 57)
Lowe, though she does not use the term, reads Zahra’s strategy here as one in which she plays in the potential space, between ‘fixed formations of either fixed masculine or feminine subjectivities’ (57). In allegorical terms, the ‘fixed formations’ are those of colonial rule, but also ‘nativist reaction’, as she argues that several narrators are ‘preoccupied’ by ‘the possibility of realizing an “authentic” female identity’, which in turn ‘corresponds to an idealized return to precolonial nativism’ (57). Thus, Lowe suggests that ES does not propose either that Zahra can or should recuperate an ‘authentic’ female identity seemingly free from the trauma of her enforced transvestism, nor that Morocco should attempt to rehabilitate itself by attempting a return to the precolonial past. By contrast, Suzanne Gauch finds that the narratives of Ahmed’s female body [within ES] and its masculine identity [...] have placed into question formulations of post-independence and national identity. For the reader, the audience is momentarily as blank as Ahmed’s notebook, proposing a fleeting insight into the chance of a truly original narrative. (1999: 200)

Gauch’s focus on the questions that the text raises rather than the answers it provides seems to me to be the most compelling reading of the political allegory in the texts. Because Zahra’s identity remains enigmatic as she refuses to be fixed into either the conventional male or female category of identity, so, too, the allegory remains enigmatic, particularly as it is not mentioned at all in NS. In fact, there are risks involved in assuming that all structures of oppression are same, similar risk to those pointed out by postcolonial critics who have cautioned against conflating the postcolonial and the postmodern. Thus, the suggestion of allegory is offered as one reading, but by no means the only one. This brief examination of the allegorical implications of the French texts will receive further attention in the Conclusion to the thesis, in order to make comparisons between both sets of texts. At this point, however, it is useful to return to the English texts and investigate Azaro’s sexuality to assess its impact on his identity.

IV. SEXUALITY IN THE ENGLISH TEXTS

A. AZARO’S SEXUALITY

Azaro’s relationship to sexuality and desire in the texts is conflicting and sporadic, as clearly shown by two parallel incidents that occur almost two hundred pages apart in FR. Azaro’s age is difficult to determine in these episodes, as the passage of time expands or contracts in the texts, often for no discernible reason. On the day of the first episode, Azaro notes that ‘time moved and something happened in the world’ (271). This event is a sexual experience that he does not quite recognise as such; his sexual awareness is shifting, with fear and pleasure often seemingly blended in equal parts. And, in keeping with his consciousness in other areas of his life, the awareness that seems to build in the first does not carry over to the
second: he is just as surprised the second time. Azaro does not gain and learn from experience the ways humans might. This keeps him in a liminal state sexually because he does not move into full, constant sexual awareness and development.

Unsurprisingly, Madame Koto’s bar is the location of each of these incidents. In an atmosphere in which the women ‘twisted and thrust their hips at the men’ and a man who ‘proceeded to grind his hips against [a woman’s] as if he didn’t want the slightest space between them’ (275), Azaro becomes involved, compelled by one of the women in the bar. ‘The woman made me dance with her. She drew me to her and my face pressed against her groin and an intoxicating smell staggered me like a new kind of dangerous wine’ (272). The seduction of the woman is apparent in Azaro’s reaction to her ‘intoxicating smell’, but he is the passive recipient of her advances. He is not at this point ashamed or embarrassed, but clearly understands on some level his own sexual awakening: ‘The woman held my face to her and danced slowly to the music while I suffocated in an old fever that sent a radiant fire bounding through my blood’. Azaro does not push her away, instead, ‘The woman laughed and pushed me away and drew me to her again’, mimicking the motions of the sex act. He attributes a ‘curious passion’ to her movements, yet his own reaction is perhaps more curious for a young boy: he feels himself ‘lifting from the ground, feet still on the ground, head swirling, a spasm seizing me, and still lifting, till I was almost flying’. The imagery becomes ever more sexual when someone ‘squirt[s] palm-wine’ on Azaro’s face, leaving him to ‘collapse among the dancing feet in an excruciating pleasure’. The aftermath is just as pleasurable, as Azaro feels no disgust at the fluids on his body: ‘The palm-wine ran down my face, down my neck, joined with the stickiness of my sweat, and mingled with the pleasurable weakness in my legs’. Though desire is new to him, he welcomes the orgasmic sensation. The scene becomes troubling for him only when one of the male adults puts his experience into words, ‘Watch your women-o! There’s a small boy here who wants to fuck!’ When the women ‘burst out laughing’, Azaro flees ‘into the crowd’ and hides his ‘embarrassment behind the counter’, allowing the reader to infer that his embarrassment is a physical manifestation of sexual arousal. Just like the loud and merging voices and the ‘unholy fecundity’ experienced in the marketplace and the bar earlier, Azaro is disturbed by this public announcement of sexuality, his own, and that of the women with their ‘large hungry eyes’ that follow him around the room, vaguely threatening him.

Azaro is overcome by the situation, particularly when a female midget ‘pesters’ him. When he tries to get away, she forces him to stay. Once still, he finds that ‘a heady smell, like charmed perfume and a secret sweating, came from her and dulled my brain’ (274). Like the other woman’s intoxicating smell, Azaro is drugged by the midget’s ‘secret sweating’. The midget is an ambiguous figure who is ‘short, with thick thighs, a heavy body, big breasts, and the beautiful and sad face of a twelve-year-old whose mother has just died’ (274). She is a
frightening hybrid combining overwhelming womanly sexuality and the purity of a beautiful and sad face. The age he attributes to her face is also significant: a girl of twelve on the cusp of womanhood, which contrasts sharply with her fully-developed body. The other ‘normal’ fully-developed woman is not nearly as disturbing. The female midget also terrifies Azaro by proposing marriage, an idea he rejects. Azaro’s fear of her has two components: he is frightened by her curious sexuality and his reaction to it, and also by the discovery that she is not, after all, human. The two fears are combined when he rejects her proposal and she startles him with the ‘sudden force of her ironic laughter’. In doing so, she throws her head back and displays not teeth, but ‘coral beads’, betraying her as a spirit in human disguise and suggesting a disconcerting sexuality only enhanced by the fact that they are beads. This bead-filled, gaping mouth, surrounded by strangely elastic lips evokes the image of an uncontainable female sexuality. As Neumann notes, ‘the destructive side of the Feminine, the destructive and deathly womb, appears most frequently in the archetypal form of a mouth bristling with teeth’ (1963: 168). Azaro screams and runs away, but his attention is quickly diverted and there is no further discussion of his sexual awakening until near the end of FR. This incident with the woman and the female midget suggest that Azaro has strong sexual feelings, but he is unaware of them. When they threaten to come to the surface, either through the jeers about a ‘small boy wanting to fuck’ or the sexual advances and proposal of marriage by the female midget, Azaro runs away to avoid becoming conscious of his own sexuality. The inconsistency of his sexual awareness is shown in a scene just outside Madame Koto’s bar. Azaro asks the beggar girl Helen, ‘Do you like my father?’ She replies, ‘Maybe it’s you that I like’ (452). It does not occur to him to make a sexual interpretation of her remarks, despite her ‘imperfect beauty’ and clear magnetism, at least for Dad. Azaro himself says, ‘I didn’t understand’ (452), nor does he express any desire to do so.

The second incident is not only important in terms of showing Azaro’s sexual awareness, but in demonstrating the capacity of such awareness to bring about transformation, movement from one stage, or even realm, to another. At another political party in Madame Koto’s bar, Azaro notes that ‘I opened my eyes and found myself cradled by a female midget’ (457-8). The use of the indefinite article indicates that Azaro does not identify her as the same female midget he met at the bar earlier in the text, though the reader is likely to remember the previous scene. This time, her advances are more overt: ‘She took my hands and placed them on her big frantic breasts. They palpitated like two mighty hearts. The female midget quivered, the smile became fainter on her face’ (459). The female midget’s frantic movements and faint smile suggest she is taking the incident even more seriously than when she proposed marriage on the last occasion. Her sexual desire is desperate and vaguely alarming to Azaro. ‘She stared at

9All other references in this paragraph are from FR page 272.
10All other references in this paragraph are from FR 459.
me with such frightening tenderness and longing that I broke out in a sweat'. The use of the word 'frightening' suggests that Azaro's sweat is due to fear, not arousal, as with the grown woman in the earlier incident, though he can recognise her longing. In addition, 'she dragged me to the dance floor, and amidst bemused laughter from the other celebrants, drew me into the pounding rhythms of the music'. The laughter of the rest of the community on this occasion is not disturbing for Azaro when it is not directed at Azaro's sexual arousal. The symbolic importance of this action is expressed in the phrase, 'before I was aware of it I was swirling amongst the sturdy legs of adults' (my italics). Azaro has entered the sexual world of adults and experienced apparently sexual pleasure without fully understanding the meaning of these events. However, the reader does: just as the reader is able to deduce that there is only one female midget in the two episodes, she is also allowed to believe that Azaro is on the brink of physiological puberty, though Azaro's conscious mind is still ignorant of this. Azaro's experience of being 'amongst the sturdy legs of adults' before he is prepared to confront it in his conscious mind propels him into a disorientating world. The female midget 'turned me round, threw herself at me, shook her breasts in my face, and clasped my young bottom, and clung to me, made me dizzy, and dissolved things around me, in her torrid dance'. The external world loses significance and form. The midget

kept spinning me, filling my head with bizarre potencies of desire, her smile widening. She held me so tight that the blood threatened to burst drunkenly in my ears. Red lights flooded my brain and when my eyes cleared, the smells of a thousand perfumes, of wild sex on hot illicit nights, of vaginal fluids, of animal sweat, overpowered my senses. (459)

The connection of vaginal fluids and animal sweat is provocative, reinforcing the bestial and disturbing connotations of female sexuality in the text. Azaro is still bemused by the 'bizarre potencies of desire', but the vocabulary becomes much more explicitly sexual than in the previous encounter with the female midget. This second orgasmic experience and its consequences place Azaro in a liminal state, suggesting as it does a momentary loss of self. This makes him vulnerable to the spirits' invention.

The disorientation of the outside world comes inside and Azaro's bodily integrity is compromised: 'I was twirling, dizzy, my being in disintegration, dancing not with the female midget but with the four-headed spirit who had been biding his time' (460). The female midget transforms into the four-headed spirit, emphasising the instability of this moment. Azaro's physical sensations pushes him into the liminal zone, with his being 'dissolving'. This dissolution of the integrated self opens the enchanted portal between the spirit and the human worlds and allows the four-headed spirit a point of entry to abduct him. Azaro finds when he is dancing that 'everything around me seemed to be changing and yielding its form' (460).
However, Azaro falls before the transformation or transport to the spirit world is complete. In this sense, Azaro never reaches the 'climax' of his own entry into an adolescence of which he is fully aware. His parents are oblivious to both the sexual and 'spiritual' implications of this experience, as well. Mum merely says, 'We watched you dancing, my son. You danced like your grandfather. And then you fell' (461), suggesting that Azaro is displaying socially-acceptable behaviour in keeping with family characteristics. With the ambiguity of these scenes, the reader's desires, too, are brought to the edge but are never fulfilled by any clear guidance as to the meaning of these incidents. However, Madame Koto's bar is worth closer examination as a site of sexual and political corruption.

B. SEXUAL AND POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN MADAME KOTO'S BAR

The discussion of Madame Koto and her uncontrollable and destructive sexual power at the beginning of the chapter, combined with Azaro's experiences of near sexual awareness in her bar suggest that the bar is a powerful site of dangerous sexual energy, in which women do not know their proper place and small boys risk a rushed entry into the sexual world of adults.

This sexual corruption may be connected to political corruption as there is a simultaneous and gradual transformation of Madame Koto's bar into a site of shameless sexuality, and into the party headquarters (in both senses of the word) of the Party of Rich. Politics and politicians are portrayed with deep suspicion, and when spirits try to abduct Azaro from the bar, he screams, 'Politicians! Politicians are taking me away' (111). Their gift of the poisoned milk, which signals the 'first public appearance' (127, my italics) of politics into the ghetto-dwellers' lives, usurps the maternal function and perverts the symbolism of the nourishing breast. Thus, it is only when the politicians appropriate both the female breast and the bar that the bar then becomes a symbol of all that is corrupt, using the image of the uncontrollable sexual licence of the women who serve there as its primary device. Though Madame Koto's own fecundity and abundance are referred to earlier in the text, it is only when she begins to cater to the politicians that she is linked to a 'shameless libidinous potency' (290) of the kind Azaro perceives in a statue found in her room. Because of the 'unbounded sensual ferocity' of the women in the bar, the men dance 'with political erections' (452), thereby making the link between the seductive power of women and politics clear: the sensible man must be cautious when getting involved with either.

The corruptive influence of the bar increases in SE, and focuses ever more on the destructive power of the women, rather than the politicians. The women servers are 'mighty women with enormous breasts and eyes that were frightening in their invulnerable stare' (36). When Dad goes there searching for his wife, he is barred from entry. Their negative influence is strongly implied: they encourage women to leave their traditional role as wives and mothers, and only chaos can result. As Brenda Cooper argues, in SE
we are firmly situated in the realm of myth, of warnings about change, of conserving the ancient ways, where, among other things, women were good mothers and Madame Koto and her bar of giant breasted women did not exist. In other words, Okri’s depiction of the women in his sequel to *The Famished Road* is as a barometer of the changes for the worse for the nation as a whole. (1998: 113)

This compelling reading of the presentation of women in *SE*, which is, to a lesser extent, also valid for *FR*, raises interesting questions about the allegorical meaning of the texts. The explicit allegory spelled out by Dad makes Azaro the symbol for Nigeria. However, Madame Koto and the depravity in her bar is also a symbol for Nigeria and its rampant corruption in the post-Independence era. Therefore, what part of Nigeria does Azaro in his unaware, innocent consciousness represent? By keeping Azaro unaware or unconscious, does the text suggest that he represents the return to an idealised precolonial Nigeria? A definitive decision on this issue cannot be reached before further examination of Azaro’s character and development in Chapter III. However, a preliminary response is that, as Chapter I showed, Azaro represents a ‘new hope’ (28) to the women when he returns from his ordeal at the police officer’s house. That he represents this hope for the women suggests that his symbolism of a new, more positive Nigeria, will not mean their relegation to their function as mothers and wives. It also implies that Azaro represents more than the rehabilitation of Nigeria’s past. But it is important not to ignore the strong suggestion in the texts that Madame Koto’s bar is a warning that does not strongly challenge patriarchal views of the role of women.

**V. CONCLUSION**

The examination of gender roles and sexuality in this chapter has shown that both sets of texts present communities who rely on a patriarchal notion of the place of women in society as passive objects to the male aggressive subject, though the ‘implicit theory’ of sexuality is also evident in the texts as means to justify the restraints placed on women in these societies. Uncontrolled female sexuality is dangerous, and must be contained. The French texts use these assumptions about the role of men and women as the basis for an exploration of Zahra’s identity. From seeming to believe utterly that femininity is a lack and grieving for a lost penis, Zahra undergoes a long process of growth and interrogation of these assumptions that allows her to revalorise the feminine body, but also to choose to remain in the potential space between expected norms of male or female behaviour. That she has the power to do so suggests that what her society assumes are ‘natural’ distinctions between the characters of the sexes are not necessarily any such thing.

However, despite the empowering vision of Zahra’s eventual conclusions about her identity in *NS*, both *ES* and *NS* contain scenes of disturbing violence against women, in
particular her rape and ‘circumcision’ in NS, that call into question the underlying assumptions in the texts regarding the freedom to make personal choices. Zahra’s acceptance of her own rape and the intervention of these episodes right after she has seemed to reach another stage of self-acceptance as a desiring woman remain unsettling for the feminist reader because her empowerment seems always to be tempered or mitigated by a form of punishment that puts her in her place. However, the presentation of Zahra’s play in the potential space does seem genuine, which is to say that the texts show Zahra as having the ability to go against social convention, including patriarchal notions of gender distinctions. The feminist reader is also challenged by the treatment of women in FR and SE, which do not seem to diverge at all from the patriarchal split of woman into either Madonna or whore. For example, Mum is revered because of her mothering qualities, keeping the family fed and clothed; though these attributes are dependent on her status as mother, her sexual identity is dramatically underplayed. This is in utter contrast to Madame Koto, condemned for not having children when Dad correlates wickedness and the inability to have children, and portrayed as voraciously sexual.

These examples demonstrate the strength of the patriarchal tradition and its subsequent expectations relating to sex and gender. Even in texts that seem to promote freedom from rigid social classification, there is a covert message that works to reinforce the status quo. However, rather than wholly undermining the conclusions reached in this chapter about the liberation offered by the potential space, I believe that the problematic presentation of women, gender and sexuality further emphasises the need for a potential space, while also presenting the difficulties of fully leaving behind the existing power hierarchy upon which these communities are based.

The focus of analysis now moves to discussion of Azaro’s identity, for which gender and sexuality are less prominent signifiers.
CHAPTER III: DEATH AND THE SPIRIT WORLD

The Introduction to this thesis stated that comparison of FR, SE, ES, and NS is appropriate because in each case the young protagonist and the nation-in-waiting attempt to construct an identity that challenges known and accepted tradition. This was shown to be the case for Zahra, the development of whose identity does take the form of a quest with apparently clearly-demarcated transformative stages from childhood acceptance of her father’s Law to her ultimate rejection of either biology or culture in favour of play in the ‘potential space’. Because of the allegorical reading invited by the text, Zahra’s strategy of resistance provides one way of examining Morocco’s colonial past. When it comes to analysing FR and SE to discover clues about Azaro’s identity and its allegorical significance, the situation is substantially different because his development is not depicted as occurring in progressive stages. In addition, his identity is not constructed primarily from gender distinctions; rather, his shifting sexuality is one manifestation of the liminality that sets him apart from other characters in the novels. However, Winnicott’s theory of the potential space will also prove useful to the understanding of Azaro’s identity, when slightly modified. As Chapter II showed, Winnicott argues that the potential space lies between the two relatively fixed poles of biology and culture; in Azaro’s case, these relatively fixed poles are the spirit world and the human world. Because of the promises he has made to his spirit companions, Azaro is expected to return to the spirit world, and thereby renounce all claims to humanity; whereas his existence in the human world is precarious unless he sacrifices his connection with the spirits. Azaro, however, rejects both of these options and deliberately chooses to reside in the human world with continued links with the spirit world—his own potential space in which he feels most free.

Though the primary focus of this chapter will be Azaro’s identity, there are important points of comparison between the English and French texts regarding the presence of the supernatural and Azaro’s and Zahra’s relationship with this other world, which strongly affects their human existence, and is an important element of their liminality. Discussion of these matters will be aided by a return to the subject of magical realism broached in the Introduction to this thesis. Though the term is problematic, with Okri himself rejecting it,1 magical realism is a useful point of entry to the examination of texts that do not present only one type of reality.

As noted in the Introduction, both Okri’s and Ben Jelloun’s works have been classified as magical realist, a type of writing that ‘often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction’ (Zamora and Faris 1995: 5). As will be shown, neither set of texts presents a world in which there is a rigid

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1In an interview with Delia Falconer, Okri implies his rejection of the term ‘magical realism’ to describe his texts. Referring to a ‘whole dimension of reality that I felt we’ve ignored in fiction’, he says, ‘And its not magic, it’s just a dimension of the spiritual. It’s a dimension of the self, a dimension that is transhistorical, that is beyond history’ (1999: 46).
boundary between the spirit and the human worlds, a situation that in the English texts affects all characters in some way or another, whilst in the French texts it affects primarily Zahra and the Consul. Zamora and Faris argue that

The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds—in phenomenal or spiritual regions where transformations, metamorphoses, dissolutions are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism. (1995: 6)

Though the palpable presence of other possible worlds is more explicit in Okri's texts than Ben Jelloun's, Zahra's liminality in terms of her sexual identity is a product of a 'fusion or coexistence' of seemingly irreconcilable opposites. Furthermore, the identity constructed by Zahra demonstrates another element of Zamora's and Faris' definition of magical realism:

Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts. (1995: 6)

Zahra's sexual identity and relationship with the Consul certainly 'fundamentally refashions' the boundaries between male and female, self and other and life and death, considering, among other events, the dreamlike ending of NS discussed in Chapter II.

As the magical realist qualities of the texts, particularly FR and SE help to illuminate understanding of identity and liminality, the most relevant of these qualities will be examined to provide a context for the discussion of Azaro and Zahra. First, a definition of the spirit world and spirits will be derived from the texts in order then to show that interactions with the spirit realm are more likely to occur in what may be termed 'liminal locations'—the forest and Madame Koto's bar in FR and SE, and the hammam in NS. In addition, just as Madame Koto's bar was shown in Chapter II to be the site of both sexual and political corruption, it will be shown that FR and SE depict a world in which spirits and politicians are very closely linked, if not indistinguishable. The chapter will then analyse Azaro and Zahra more specifically as characters who have a special relationship with the spirit world or the supernatural, as well as with death. Indeed, they are characters for whom death does not hold the same terrors as it would for normal mortals. The third section of the chapter will focus more exclusively on Azaro and the ways in which his identity is shaped by his relationship to the spirit world through examination of the fluidity of both his perception and his personal boundaries. The former will be explored principally through examination of an experience Azaro has with a mask he finds in the forest; the collective blindness of the ghetto-dwellers in SE will also be used to advance the discussion of perception. In the investigation of Azaro's personal boundaries and in the assessment of significance of Azaro's choice of the potential space, two
significant counterparts to characters influential to Zahra's development, as explored in Chapter II, will be discussed. The first is the blind old man, the character who wishes to appropriate Azaro's sight and who may be compared to the Consul, Zahra's blind lover. Though, unlike the Consul, the blind old man is enemy rather than friend, this antagonism provides clues to understanding Azaro's identity just as does Zahra's relationship with the Consul. The second parallel figure is Ade, an *abiku* like Azaro, but one who wants to die. Ade's more conventional attitude (for a spirit-child) to death provides a foil for Azaro's own choice to stay, just as Fatima in *ES* is the 'miroir' and 'hantise' of Zahra in *ES*. This section will conclude with an assessment of the political implications of Azaro's life as an allegory for Nigeria. The fourth and final section of the chapter will widen focus to include the French and English texts and use a specific example of Azaro's and Zahra's visions, which have demonstrable and important effects on the political climate of the texts, to consider the claims that magical realism is an apolitical or depoliticised art form, as broached in the Introduction to this thesis.

I. LIMINAL LOCATIONS IN THE HUMAN WORLD

Because Azaro is a spirit-child who refuses to cut off his links to the spirit world, *FR* and *SE* are marked by continual interaction between the human and spirit worlds. The spirit world in *FR* and *SE* is an idyllic world, in some ways very similar to the children's village visited by Zahra in *NS*. It is clearly defined as the 'land of beginnings' in which 'spirits mingled with the unborn' and 'we knew no boundaries' (3). This lack of boundaries is the source of the spirits' freedom and is presented in a positive light when contrasted with the human world:

> Tender sibyls, benign sprites, and the serene presences of our ancestors were always with us, bathing us in the radiance of their diverse rainbows. There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born, and one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering. (4)

Therefore, in the initial stages of *FR*, the spirit world is presented as a domain of 'pure dreams' as opposed to the human world, which is full of suffering.

The spirit world as depicted in *NS* is similar in its positive qualities, but different in that rather than being a land before birth, for those who are able to see it, it is a world of waking dreams. In contrast to the English texts, it is not Zahra who describes this world, but rather the Consul, a figure whose blindness seems to give him increased access to other realms of reality, just as Zahra's liminality allows her similar access. When the Consul introduces Zahra to the land of waking dreams, he describes it as
un pays fabuleux où les arbres se penchaient pour me donner de l’ombre, où il pleuvait des cristaux, où des oiseaux de toutes les couleurs me devançaient pour me montrer le chemin, où le vent m’apportait des parfums, des pays à l’écorce transparente où je m’isolais des heures et des jours. J’y ai rencontré des prophètes à l’âme gaie, des amis d’enfance que j’avais perdu de vue, des filles dont j’étais amoureux quand j’étais petit; je me suis promené dans un jardin exotique où il n’y avait ni barrière ni gardien. (95)

The Consul’s description to Zahra strongly evokes the idea of a paradisal garden where there is no suffering and which it is painful to leave: the Consul notes that the land of waking dreams `me manque à chaque fois que j’ouvre mes yeux sur les ténèbres éternelles’ (99). Just as the spirit world is a refuge for Azaro from the cruelty of the human world, the ‘pays fabuleux’ is an escape for the Consul from the monotony of blindness.²

It is interesting to note, however, that when the spirits appear in the human world, as they often do, particularly in liminal locations, they are not presented in either set of texts as ‘benign sprites’ or ‘tender sibyls’. Rather, as will be seen, they are most often presented as grotesque or malevolent. Thus, though the spirit world and the ‘pays fabuleux’ are the ideal realm to which Azaro, Zahra and the Consul apparently aspire entry, when there are ‘spirits in the material world’, they are much less attractively presented.

Elements of the confluence of worlds characteristic of magical realist texts may easily be seen in the English and French texts in what may be called liminal locations, sites of movement from one world to another or of other boundary transgression. It is interesting to note that the two important sites of gender and sexuality in the texts, the hammam and Madame Koto’s bar, are also the sites of most interaction between the spirit and human worlds in the texts, with the effect these locations are presented as sites of multiple transgressions and boundary crossings, emphasising their liminal qualities. These sites are important because they are the physical manifestations of the symbolic threshold between the human and spirit worlds, the visible and the invisible.

Interaction between the worlds is common in the texts, particularly in FR and SE: Azaro’s spirit companions make trouble for him; he runs into spirits in the marketplace; the dead appear and reappear. Early in FR Azaro makes the discovery that ‘it wasn’t just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander amongst the fruits of the earth and sea’ (16). Such interaction of humans and spirits is consistent with the traditional Yoruba belief that there

²Though NS does not imply that the children’s village and the ‘pays fabuleux’ are the same, there are some interesting similarities between the spirit world of English texts, the Consul’s ‘pays fabuleux’ and the children’s village. In the latter the children clearly state that they are there to redeem suffering; Zahra’s ‘exile’ from that kind of ‘land of origins’, before consciousness of sex difference and social law, is in some ways similar to Azaro’s ‘exile’ from the spirit world; and the Consul escapes to his ‘pays fabuleux’ to avoid the monotony and distress of the human world, and teaches Zahra to do as well.
is ‘a communion and a communication going on all the time between those that have gone into
the life beyond and those that are here on earth’ (Awolalu 1979: 62). As Brenda Cooper points
out, the text presents a world in which ‘the spirits are a routine part of the mundane everyday,
and electric light and sound constitute the awesome and the unbelievable’ (1998: 84). The forest
and Madame Koto’s bar are locations with a literal or figurative position at a cross-roads, and in
which there is some kind of obscurity; as such, they encourage closer relations with the spirit
world. In the French texts, encounters with the supernatural come most often in the form of
visions or dreams, though there is some presence of spirits in the hammam. Françoise Legey
notes that, in traditional Moroccan culture, it is believed that

the earth is the abode of genii, but they are specially fond of desert places, of drains, of
lavatories, and ruins, and cemeteries. They come up to the surface of the ground at
night, and from the moment of the Prayer of the Aasser, between three and four
o’clock in the afternoon, one should be very careful not to offend them. (1935: 31)

Each site and its overall meaning is as ambiguous as its physical environment. The reader is
forced to pay close attention if she is not to ignore the complexities of these sites. This
ambiguity points to some of the challenges posed by magical realist elements in texts, which
favour multiple meanings over restrictive ones.

A. THE FOREST

Azaro is continually drawn to the forest, and many of the breaches of his personal
boundaries to be discussed in this chapter occur there. Therefore, it is important to look at this
location, in order to understand why Azaro is particularly vulnerable here. Though Madame
Koto’s bar attracts spirits, as will be seen below, the forest is their natural home on earth; its
giant trees and rampant foliage obscure vision and afford a place to hide. Azaro finds that ‘the
forest swarmed with unearthly beings. It was like an overcrowded marketplace. [...] They were
so numerous that they interpenetrated one another’ (FR 12). This interpenetration of the spirits
indicates that their ‘personal’ boundaries (the boundaries of their subjectivity) are not fixed;
they are able to be ‘interpenetrated’, several layers of being or reality superimposed one on
another. It will be seen below that Azaro shares this liability to interpenetration to a certain
extent, suggesting that this quality derives from his spirit heritage. And he, like the other spirits,
is also attracted to the forest.

The forest is a world of visual obscurity, a constant interplay of light and dark. In the
forest, the divides between reality and fantasy, human and spirit is blurred. On one occasion,
Azaro
CHAPTER III: DEATH AND THE SPIRIT WORLD

wandered for a long time in the forest. The earth gave off a potent aroma and in the heat the palm trees released alcoholic fumes deep in their trunks which I breathed in with the smell of their barks and their wine-sap evaporating into the quivering air. I listened to the curlews in the groves of wild pine trees. Intoxicated with the alcoholic fumes of sun and earth I broke through a remote section of the forest, where sunbirds clustered in baobab branches, and I emerged in another reality, a strange world, a path which had completed its transition into a road. (241)

That the word ‘alcoholic’ is used twice and that Azaro is ‘intoxicated’ only emphasises the distorting quality of the forest. Indeed, the forest itself is in the midst of transformation due to encroaching modernity. In her chapter on magical realism in FR, Cooper argues that the destruction of the forest in its role is a symbol of colonialism and the destruction of traditional beliefs in favour of modernity. She suggests that the spirits ‘thrive in the safety of the darkness afforded by the uncleared bush’ and that ‘the widening paths and the well lit clearings pose a threat to the spirit world’ (1998: 82). The spirits’ increased occupation of Madame Koto’s bar may be a result of their displacement from the forest. However, though the forest is fairly consistently portrayed as representative of tradition and traditional beliefs, the road is a much more ambiguous image, being related both to the advent of modernity, and to traditional stories—the famished road itself, as will be seen. Azaro says, ‘Sometimes I played in the forest. My favourite place was the clearing’ (FR 143). If the forest is read as tradition and the road modernity, the clearing may be read as a buffer zone between the two and thus, a liminal location in a similar way as Madame Koto’s bar. Though Azaro laments the fact that the ‘trees I got to know so well were cut down and only their stumps, dripping sap, remained’ (143), he is attracted to the growing clearing; it offers him a world in the process of transformation that mirrors his own liminality. The trees, ‘dripping sap’, may be seen to symbolise the suffering that Azaro’s choice to remain in the human world will cause him; however, he, unlike the trees, is not mutilated by his residence in the liminal potential space, as it is his choice to do so. Near the forest and the clearing is situated Madame Koto’s bar, the other principal liminal location of Okri’s texts. It, too, is a site of transformation, though a less positive one.

B. MADAME KOTO’S BAR

Madame Koto’s bar is at a junction, where multiple social groups and multiple world views come together; in addition, it is also one of the favourite meeting places of the spirits. On one occasion, Azaro says, ‘I felt on the edge of reality. Madame Koto’s bar seemed like a strange fairyland in the real world, a fairyland that no one could see’ (FR 208). His comment emphasises the bar’s position within the real world, but simultaneously apart from it. When he goes home with Dad, he says, ‘we left the edge of reality, the fairyland that no one could see,
and went home through the swaying night' (213). Azaro recognises the bar as at the border between real and unreal, making it a likely place for spirits. It is also the site of some of the most vigorous pursuits of Azaro by his spirit companions. Cooper’s analysis of Madame Koto’s bar alludes to many of the points that make it important in liminal terms. She writes that the bar is a site of multiple meanings, the most obvious of which is the bar’s own spatial positioning at the border between road and bush, at the gateway to the spirits, who enter from the bush, and haven to the new politicians, who enter from the road. (1998: 83)

From this analysis, it may be inferred that the bar is a liminal location because it is itself a crossroads between the spirit and the human worlds. And, in fact, like the forest, the bar is itself in a constant state of transition as Madame Koto’s fortunes change, so its meaning also changes. Cooper notes that the bar ‘is the zone of the mutant and the hybrid, women-birds and bird-fish, creatures, half-human and part animal’ (1998: 83). Within the bar, there are combinations of spirits and humans, incompletely transformed from man to beast and vice versa, making the liminal quality of the location explicit. Confusing the issue even further is the fact that the spirits disguise themselves as humans. Azaro says,

It occurred to me that they were spirits who had borrowed bits of human beings to partake of human reality. They say spirits do that sometimes. They do it because they get tired of just being spirits. They want to taste human things, pain, drunkenness, laughter, and sex. Sometimes they do it to spread mischief and sometimes to seduce grown-ups or abduct children into their realm. [...] I became certain that Madame Koto’s fetish had somehow been attracting them. I was confirmed in this notion by the fact that they seemed to cluster most thickly beneath the fetish. (FR 136-7)

The spirits in this location are truly liminal because they are confused (and confusing) and hard to distinguish. Madame Koto’s fetish, a traditional symbol of power, attracts the spirits to her bar, just as her palm wine and, later, stout, attracts the politicians; and both the spirits and the politicians are certainly able to find the ‘human things’ of ‘drunkenness, laughter, and sex’ in the bar. Indeed, the bar is an excellent place for the spirits because their presence is less easily detected: Azaro, more sensitive than most to spirits, often doubts his vision and assumes the clients are all human. An average bar customer would do the same, attributing anything untoward to the effects of alcohol.

In addition, as Cooper argues, ‘the bar is undoubtedly in one sense a border, a gateway, a moment of change, of welding between old and new, of mutation and transformation’ (1998: 85). One way in which the old and new is manifested in the bar is not only the mutant or hybrid
nature of much of the clientele, but the conflation of spirits and politicians. Just as Chapter II suggested the connection between sexual and political corruption discernible in the bar, it is possible to see links between mischievous or evil spirits and corrupt politicians, both of whom like to drink there. The best illustration of this is Azaro’s observation that

the bar took on a sinister light. I saw its other sides, felt its secret moods. The men and women seemed like better versions of the spirits who used to come here, and who had tried to steal me away. They had a greater mastery of the secrets of human disguise. I heard their metallic voices and the laughter of their perfumes and underneath all the dancing and the energy was the invasion of a rancid smell. (FR 273)

This description uses juxtaposed opposites and mingled categories to emphasise that things are not what they seem. The use of words like ‘sinister’ and ‘secret’ further stress the more negative qualities of the bar and its clientele that they would rather keep hidden. The politicians are presented as merely more skilful deceivers than the malicious spirits who try to abduct Azaro. The undercurrent of the ‘rancid smell’ signals that these beings exude menace; they are ‘spoiled’ despite their mastery of human disguise. Azaro’s observation is made during his first encounter with the female midget, in which he begins fully to understand the sexual and political depravity in the bar. Thus, the boundaries between the worlds of the spirits and the political situation in the text are blurred in FR, since they are set up in parallel, allowing one to become a metaphor for the other in the text, just as the ‘unbounded sexual ferocity’ of the women in the bar becomes a metaphor for political corruption. More will be said on this matter when discussing the supposedly depoliticised genre of magical realism; the discussion will now switch to an investigation of the presence of spirits in the hammam in NS to assess how this liminal locations may be compared to the forest and Madame Koto’s bar.

C. THE HAMMAM

A significant difference between the hammam and Madame Koto’s bar is that the former has no political significance, save for the comment it makes on the division of the sexes in Moroccan Muslim society. However, the liminality of both locations does derive in part from physical causes: Madame Koto’s clients may be affected by intoxication, whereas steam in the hammam distorts vision and also dehydrates the body, leaving a person potentially more vulnerable to visions, as demonstrated by Zahra’s description:

Il y a une pénombre où une bonne vue pourrait à peine distinguer un fil blanc d’un fil noir. Si l’ambiguïté de l’âme avait une lumière, ce ne pourrait être que celle-là. La vapeur habille les corps nus. L’humidité, ruisselant en gouttelettes grises sur les murs, se nourrit des palabres qui ont lieu à longueur de temps dans ce salon. (NS 88)
The hammam’s distortion of clear vision paradoxically seems to sharpen human vision into a non-human realm. Indeed, the baths are also presented as attractive to spirits. As with Madame Koto’s bar, their presence is less likely to be noticed or their security threatened because the physical effects of the heat and the darkness of the surroundings act as a cover. Zahra points to the fact that the hammam is a liminal location:

Le bain est en général un lieu propice pour les visions. Les fantômes l’occupent la nuit pour leurs conversations secrètes. Tôt le matin, quand on ouvre les portes, on sent une odeur de mort, et on trouve par terre des épluchures de cacahuètes. C’est bien connu, les fantômes parlent en mangeant. (89)

Thus, the hammam has both a human and a ghostly clientele, similar to that of Madame Koto’s bar. In Moroccan folklore, the hammam is liable to visitation by ‘genii who are busy washing’ though they ‘do not always make themselves visible to human beings’ (Legey 1935: 34-5). Zahra is the only person in NS to whom the spirits reveal themselves, whereas others, such as the Assise, are more sceptical. In the hammam Zahra sees ‘deux femmes d’une maigreur impressionante’ (64). She instinctively does not trust their intentions and is proved right when they block her exit. Upon her escape, the Assise tells her, ‘Tu as dû rêver. Tu es tellement fatiguée que tu as vu le diable et sa femme!’ (65). The Assise assumes the vision was a figment of Zahra’s imagination, yet will not let Zahra spend the night in the hammam because ‘les deux djnouns risquent de réapparaître la nuit et de te faire la peau’ (65). The threat that these ‘djnouns’, will ‘se faire la peau’ is similar to that posed by the spirit clientele in Madame Koto’s bar, who wish to seduce or abduct.

This section has shown that both sets of texts show more than one ‘possible world’ displayed, and the boundaries between real and unreal, spirit and human, are blurred, suggesting that dream and myth are part of reality rather than separate from it, an idea that will receive more attention in the Conclusion to this thesis. Now that this landscape of possible worlds has been discussed, it is possible to situate Azaro and Zahra by examining their relationships to them as manifestations of their liminality.

II. AZARO AND ZAHRA AS SPECIAL BEINGS

Azaro’s and Zahra’s access to the spirit world and propensity to see spirits may be interpreted as a cause, in Azaro’s case, or an effect, in Zahra’s, of liminality. Azaro’s connection to the spirit world is stated explicitly:
I buried my secrets early. I buried them in moonlight, the air alive with white moths. I buried my magic stones, my mirror, my special promises, my golden threads, objects of identity that connected me to the world of spirits. I buried them all in a secret place [...]. (9)

This burial scene may be paralleled to a similar scene in NJ, alluded to in Chapter II, in which Zahra buries the remnants of her male identity in the grave of her father. These artefacts include the ‘photo de la cérémonie de la circoncision’, her ‘carte d’identité’ and ‘l’acte de mariage avec la malheureuse Fatima’ (56). These articles are clearly representative of her imposed masculinity, and comparable to the tokens that connect Azaro to his spirit identity. The major difference between the two burial scenes lies in the purpose behind them: burial of his spirit tokens attaches Azaro more closely to the spirit world, protecting him from human detection, whereas Zahra’s gesture detaches her from the male identity she has rejected, and puts them where they belong, with the father who created ‘Ahmed’. This is the final death of ‘Ahmed’. The burial scenes imply that such tokens help to establish and confirm identity, recognised as they are by self and others as proof of a particular identity or identification.

Zahra’s experiences with both the ‘pays fabuleux’ and spirits who enter the human world are less frequent than Azaro’s because she is entirely human, but the texts suggest that her liminality, stemming from the tension between biology and culture, allows her special ties to the ‘pays fabuleux’. Indeed, the Consul ponders,

Peut-être êtes-vous native de ce pays? Je me suis déjà posé la question. Je dis cela à cause du parfum de votre présence. Ce n’est pas un parfum qui sort d’un flacon, mais il émane de votre peau. C’est le parfum unique de l’être. (99)

Though the Consul also knows the land of waking dreams, he is not a native of that realm, only a visitor. Thus, Zahra is uniquely connected to this special world. As for Azaro, he emanates a kind of ‘parfum de l’être’, as he possesses the ‘beautiful and fated eyes’ (FR 4) of lingering abikus. Azaro and Zahra are thus, in life, more closely connected to the spirit world than ‘ordinary’ characters.

Another significant aspect of these characters is that they have a special relationship to death, which is clearly defined in the texts. Very early in FR Azaro mentions the ‘fact of dying’ (5). Later in the text, when he is contemplating starving himself to death to punish his parents, he sinks into ‘the essential indifferent serenity of the spirit-child’s soul—the serenity that accepts extremes of experience calmly because the spirit-child is at home with death’ (326). Though he later rejects this indifference, part of the reason for this feeling is his immense familiarity with the spirit world: neither death nor the afterworld, he believes, hold surprises for him. In fact, it is entry to the human world that is more terrifying for him, as the abiku
perceives it as his place of exile. Azaro asserts that ‘To be born is to come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile. So it was with me’ (5). Thus, Azaro has no fear of death because he knows that the world of the spirits is a beautiful one and that his life does not end with death—indeed, death is simply another beginning.

However, though Azaro’s concealment of his spirit tokens is typical of *abikus*, he is unique among them, which gives added significance to his liminality. Deliberately, ‘somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living’ Azaro chooses to ‘stay’ (5). He does not give definitive reasons for this choice; rather he proposes several possibilities, among them these:

> It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. (5)

The use of the speculative ‘may’ leaves the question open, giving Azaro and the reader the opportunity to decide which reason, if any, is the most compelling. Azaro’s willingness to suffer the world contrasts sharply with other *abikus*, however, he does not reject the spirit world completely. If he were to become human, he would agree ‘to reveal where we had hidden the spirit tokens that bound us to the other world’ (5). Azaro refuses to do this, and his parents’ poverty delays the performance of the ceremonies that would sever his ties with the spirit world completely and transform him into a human child. Azaro’s reaction to this deferral is positive: ‘I was happy. I didn’t want it performed. I didn’t want to entirely lose contact with that other world of light and rainbows and possibilities’ (9). Indeed, later in the novel when the herbalist ‘said something about the importance of retrieving my spirit tokens which he believed I had hidden in secret place. […] I immediately thought of him as an enemy’ (341). Therefore, Azaro is truly liminal, and by choice: he is neither fully spirit nor fully human. In fact, Azaro observes that *abikus* like him, who choose to stay in the human world, ‘are the strange ones, with half our being always in the spirit world’ (4), whereas more typical spirit-children such as Ade never fully commit to living in the human world. This distinction between the two will prove important to a fuller understanding of Azaro’s identity later in this chapter.

Zahra’s relationship to death is remarkably similar to Azaro’s and is best expressed by the Consul, who says of himself and Zahra that
Notre force c'est que nous ne devons rien à personne. A n'importe quel moment nous pouvons quitter ce monde, sans regret, sans drame. J'ai passé toute ma vie à me faire à l'idée de ce départ volontaire. Ma mort, je la porte en moi, à la boutonnière. [...] Je dis 'nous' parce que nous sommes semblables et un pacte scellé par le secret nous unit.

The indifference toward dying remarked by the Consul is comparable with the 'indifferent serenity' of the abiku child, and both also contemplate suicide with the idea of a 'départ volontaire'. Choice is a significant factor here, just as it was shown to be in Chapter II in Zahra's comment that she and the Consul 'étions volontairement enfermés dans un crypte' (128). Residence in the liminal potential space allows these three characters access to multiple worlds, erases or minimises the boundary between life and death, and deprives death of its sting, particularly when it is chosen rather than imposed. On the last page of NS, in which she encounters the purportedly deceased Assise and the Consul, Zahra discovers in a flash of insight that 'entre la vie et la mort il n'y avait qu'une très mince couche faite de brume ou de ténèbres, que le mensonge tissait ses fils entre la réalité et l'apparence' (189). Her use of the word 'ténèbres' is significant here, as it is consistently used throughout ES and NS both to describe the world of the shadows in which the blind dwell, and as a place of ambiguity, which is preferable to total light or darkness. Indeed, Zahra finds in ES that 'La lumière était indésirable. Et je me sentais plus libre dans l'obscurité' (164). Obscurity frees her to be ambiguous and emphasises the liminal quality of the territory between the worlds of the living and the dead, and the potential space in which she chooses to reside. Zahra has rejected the appearance of absolute masculinity and femininity, and when she rejects them at the end of the novel, she also reconsiders her ideas about death.

Now that it has been established that Azaro and Zahra have a special relationship with the spirit world and death, the stage has been set to undertake a closer examination of Azaro's identity and how it is presented in the texts.

III. AZARÔ'S IDENTITY

Though FR begins with Azaro's birth and seems to proceed from there, with no references to flashbacks or flashforwards (or 'analepsis' and 'prolepsis', to use Gérard Genette's terms), the narration does not rely on action to move forward. Rather, the story is episodic in nature, with few clear indications of any definitive meaning for these episodes. Maggi Phillips persuasively argues that 'Okri is able to create a non-linear narrative that provokes, simultaneously, a sense of defamiliarisation and a sharpening of perception' (1997: 169). Though the impact of a non-linear narrative will be discussed in greater detail in the Conclusion to the thesis, before that analysis can be legitimately undertaken, it is necessary to examine perception as a key to understanding Azaro's identity, for, though none of these
moments is lasting, Azaro does go through the text repeatedly experiencing moments of ‘defamiliarisation’ and ‘sharpening of perception’.

The essence of Zahra’s identity is also linked to perception, but it operates in a different way to that of Azaro for, as Chapter II demonstrated, Zahra’s identity is characterised by being torn between appearance and reality: she is deeply troubled by the challenge of how to perceive herself, provoking her to avoid mirrors for a time. In Azaro’s case, it is not so much that he wishes to perceive himself properly—there are very few examples in the text to suggest that he gives the matter any thought—but, rather, that he struggles to perceive the world properly. Though Azaro asserts that spirit-children ‘feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see’ (FR 3), his own challenge throughout FR is to see properly. Other characters express their belief that Azaro’s perception is unique. For example, on one occasion when Azaro and Dad disagree on something Azaro has seen, Dad replies, ‘It’s your eyes’ (354). Because of the importance of perception to Azaro’s identity, examination of important moments of perceptual difficulty will shape the analysis of Azaro’s identity. Azaro shows the reader and himself who he is by virtue of what he sees, and by his continual struggles to see the world as it ‘really’ is.

The second, related factor of Azaro’s identity is built upon the subject/object or self/Other oppositions discussed in Chapter II. These provide the principal tension in Zahra’s conception of her identity, as she repeatedly questions whether she is self or other, image or reflection. For Azaro, boundaries between self and external other are continually blurred or eradicated. This sometimes occurs due to Azaro’s choice, but is also presented as out of Azaro’s control: Azaro is unable to stop many of the ‘invasions’ of his personal boundaries. He finds them disturbing, and names them as one reason he ‘didn’t want to be born’ (7); and yet, this chapter will reveal that this initial distaste is not as absolute as it at first seems.

A. PERCEPTION

Azaro’s eyes are constantly playing tricks on him. It is not that he sees spirits where none exist, but that he sometimes fails to recognise spirits when he sees them. Indeed, one of the ways that the ‘realism’ of the ‘magic’ in the texts seems to be conveyed is that it is not the appearance of spirits that is presented as fantastic or unreliable. Rather, it is Azaro’s failure to recognise these spirits, the unreliability that he himself perceives in his own vision, despite his close links to the spirit world. For example, in Madame Koto’s bar he

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3 'Personal boundaries' is neither the most elegant nor the most expressive term for the concept. What I mean by this term is twofold: the physical boundary of Azaro’s body and the boundary/boundaries of his sense of himself and his identity as a subject. However, I have chosen this term in preference to 'subjectivity boundaries' as the latter is grammatically incorrect.
realised for the first time that many of the customers were not human beings. [...] The moment I saw them as spirits, drinking palm-wine without getting drunk, confused about the natural configuration of the human body, everything made sense. (136)

This is not the only occasion on which Azaro alters his perception in order to accommodate the reality that presents itself. When he encounters a very hairy man, he finds that he does not know how to perceive him: 'I had to bend my head and twist my thinking to make sense of his features. I couldn’t understand how I had perceived him as normal the first time I saw him' (65-6). He shows an amazing agility of perception in his ability to do this, emphasising the flexibility of his perception.

In addition to Azaro's perceptual acrobatics, there are two groups of factors that affect perception for all characters, but particularly Azaro. The first group is physical and is primarily manifested in intoxication, alcoholic or otherwise. Before one set of visions, Azaro says, 'I was in a drunken haze' (38). This intoxication increases his already remarkable susceptibility to extravagant visions. Not only does Azaro's (and his father's) alcohol consumption receive repeated attention in FR, but, as seen earlier, the effect of the forest is also described as alcoholic. Such alcoholic intervention always precedes either an experience with spirits or another kind of perceptual difficulty for Azaro—a situation in which he does not believe his eyes or is confused by what he sees. Illness also belongs to this group, and will be discussed at the end of this chapter in order to illuminate the discussion of the political implications of these visions.

The other group of factors is natural, principally burning sun and pouring rain, which have a strong effect on Azaro's vision. For example, Ade first appears in connection with harsh sunshine, the dry season in which Azaro notes that it sometimes 'seemed that the brightness of the sun burned people out of reality' (270). This sun burns Ade into reality and then out of it again when Ade suddenly becomes his own shadow. After a particularly frightening encounter with the blind old man, Azaro notes, 'The rain made everything alien. Its persistence altered my vision' (289). In none of these cases, however, does Okri undermine the veracity of Azaro's vision, either by the intervention of remarks from an older, wiser Azaro, or from another character within the text. Rather, the suggestion is that these are factors that facilitate his connection with the spirit world, enhance rather than diminish his perception, though this increased insight into other worlds is not always welcome.

Azaro's experience with a mask he finds in the forest goes behind the factors of intoxication, sun and rain in altering his perception.

B. THE MASK

On one of the numerous occasions that Azaro flees Madame Koto's bar, he begins to wander in the forest and makes a significant choice to see through the eyes of a mask, thereby
shifting his entire view of reality, an experience which he finds intensely disconcerting. This incident is prefaced by his realisation in the forest that he has ‘emerged into a new world’ (242) and that ‘the forest was full of mirages from which I could not escape’ (243). Already, therefore, the location in the forest destabilises the solidity and trustworthiness of his vision; this new world is no more stable to Azaro’s perception than any of the many others he enters throughout the text. As he wanders, Azaro finds a mask that ‘looked frightening from the side, but which contorted in an ecstatic laughter at the front. It had eyes both daunting and mischievous’ (FR 244). The mask suggests that there are at least two faces for every reality. Cooper argues that Azaro’s mask ‘is a hybrid face, which presents a different visor, depending on the angle from which it is viewed’ (1998: 100). It is also evocative of the masquerade in traditional Yoruba culture, ‘where the ritual journey of discovery and spirituality is crucially linked to masking, where the spirits of the deities or of the natural world enter life and influence it through a masked specialist’ (Cooper 1998: 100). Azaro’s experiences with reality and perception throughout the text suggest that this conclusion is a valid one, and that any reality shifts ‘depending on the angle from which it is viewed’. Interestingly, Azaro asserts that it ‘was the face of one of those paradoxical spirits that move amongst men and trees, carved by an artist who has the gift to see such things and the wisdom to survive them’ (244). Azaro himself is a paradoxical spirit, and an affinity may be inferred between him and the face of the mask, and perhaps the artist who has carved it. Indeed, the connection between Azaro and the artist and his role will be pursued in further detail in the Conclusion to the thesis.

There are four stages in Azaro’s experience with the mask: the transformation of his reality, disorientation, insight, and final rejection. The first stage is the initial effect of the mask, when Azaro ‘picked it up and wore it over my face and looked out from its eyes and something blurred the sun and the forest became as night’ (244-45). This distortion through the eyes of the mask dramatically alters his world view:

When I looked out through the mask I saw a different world. There were beings everywhere in the darkness and the spirits were each of them a sun. [...] I saw a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull. I saw dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws. (245)

The mask, itself paradoxical and hybrid, allows Azaro access to a world that also has these qualities: the creatures he sees are like those that often populate Madame Koto’s bar, hybrid combinations of tigers and bulls, dogs and snakes. However, the text does not present any other clues as to the importance of these creatures; they are merely parts of the reality that the mask allows Azaro to see, one of many interspaces presented in the text. The connection with the types of creatures he encounters in the bar who try to abduct him may be a warning of the danger this situation presents to him. However, unlike the mask’s creator, who has the wisdom
to survive the sight of paradoxical spirits, Azaro is not as hardy, as Cooper notes (1998: 100). Azaro’s behaviour in this first phase expresses curiosity, but not undue interest in what he sees. He removes the mask after the initial vision and moves to the second stage of the vision, surprise at the effects of the mask. When Azaro takes off the mask at this point,

the world turned and the trees seemed to be falling on me and it took a while before things came back to normal. I held on to the mask and went on hobbling, looking for a way out of the forest. (245)

The power of the paradoxical face of the mask and Azaro’s susceptibility to the visions it offers are shown by the delay in the restoration of his normal world view. And yet, though Azaro recognises as some level the transformative effect of the mask on his vision, he is unwilling to let it go.

His ambivalence is further reflected in the second stage of his experience with the mask. One of the realities Azaro has seen in the forest before he discovers the mask is a man with golden hooves who seems to be following him. However, when Azaro dons the mask again to look at him, he ‘was completely invisible. He was not there. I could not see him at all through the eyes of the mask’ (245). Therefore, Azaro’s own world and the world through the mask seem to be completely opposite of each other, leading Azaro to be severely disoriented: ‘I had begun to lose my sense of reality, confused by the mask’ (245). His own reality is overtaken and replaced by that of the mask, distracting him. Though this realisation is at first disconcerting, it leads to the third stage of the experience.

In this third stage, Azaro begins to use the mask deliberately to give him a different understanding of his own perception. For example, when he reaches the clearing where ‘I used to play and where I had buried Madame Koto’s fetish’, he finds that it ‘was both exactly as I remembered it and different’ (246). When he fails to ‘isolate what was different about it’, he ‘wore the mask and looked and saw that what was a clearing was in fact a village of spirits’ (246). The use of the term ‘in fact’ implies that, from trusting his own perception and being wary of the mask, he has begun to trust the altered reality offered through wearing the mask more than his own vision. However, even the new reality presented through the mask is unstable: he discovers that when he changes his position and moves behind the ‘odd tree’, which has sprung up since he buried Madame Koto’s fetish there, he sees ‘a completely different world to what I had been seeing. I saw a different reality’ (246). This different reality is a ‘new spirit world’ in which he is threatened by a creature ‘ugly and magnificent like a prehistoric dragon’, a ‘devourer of humans, of lost souls, of spirits, of all things wonderful’ (247). This vision of the new (and not improved) spirit world, causes Azaro to reject the mask definitively, the fourth and final stage of his experience with it. His fear of this advancing creature leaves him ‘desperately want[ing] to take the mask off so I wouldn’t have to see
anything' (247). This rather childish attitude suggests that he believes if he cannot see the creature, it will cease to exist, thereby saving him. This is not the case, however, because even when he no longer sees the creature, it can be seen by the beast into which the tree he’s ‘riding’ has transformed. The denial of the reality of the mask is not simple, however. Azaro tore off the vegetable string, but the mask stayed on, stuck to my face. I tried to tear it off again, but it was like stripping the skin of my own face. [...] I realised I had made a terrible mistake [...]. (247)

This moment is one of the few occasions in which Azaro recognises the consequences of his actions. As a spirit-child, he seems to take the existence of multiple and often conflicting realities for granted, and is not permanently affected by them. The problem with the mask is that it threatens to alter his reality forever into a reduced and distorted one that frightens him. He realises that his vision risks permanent transformation and rejects it, asserting his own perception and agency. In a desperate act, ‘without caring, I ripped the mask off my face, obliterating [the bull’s] existence from my eyes. My face felt somewhat raw. I no longer saw the prehistoric monster’ (247). This example demonstrates the various outcomes of altered perception. In one way, it presents a more accurate picture of reality, in another, it shows the danger of having individual perception appropriated by the mask.

Azaro seems to seek enhancement rather than constriction of his reality, but he also wants see to the world properly, to be able to distinguish spirits from humans, and good from evil. He does not always succeed, however: for instance, in SE he finds that ‘The moon, fertilising me with incandescent hallucinations, planted strange words in my head, words that hinted at the near impossibility of seeing clearly’ (235). Therefore, the frequent shifts in his ideas about perception and the reality that the world presents to him provide clues to understanding his identity: the agility of his vision and his perception are manifestations of his liminality. The moments at which he rejects the appropriation of his sight are the moments in which he comes closest to asserting his own subjectivity and agency. His struggle to see properly may be thus linked to his attempts to understand his world and his own place within it.

However, SE is preoccupied not only with Azaro’s personal identity or perception, but also with collective vision. Just as Azaro thinks that the monstrous creature will disappear if he refuses to see it, the ghetto-dwellers are wilfully blind to uncomfortable political realities in SE.

C. COLLECTIVE BLINDNESS IN SE

The focus of SE radically shifts from an exploration of Azaro’s individual perception and identity to investigation of the communal perception of the ghetto community. The most significant and lasting example of the complex presentation of blindness and its symbolism in the text occurs in the episode of the refusal to bury Ade’s father.
Near the end of *SE*, Ade fulfils his wish and returns to his spirit companions through death. His distraught father appears to protest as an 'insane prophet' with 'leaves in his hair, kaoline on his face, and a hammer in his hand' and his 'wild threats' and 'prophecies delivered in a high-pitched insane voice' (210). Dad witnesses his death and becomes inexplicably blind. Though there is no clear symbolic purpose for the origin of the blindness, Dad does take lessons from it at the end of the text.

However, the blindness that then besets the entire ghetto community is clearly presented as symbolically relevant. Neither the killers nor the other members of the community do anything about the carpenter's body, a sign of the confusion of the world under the corrupt Masquerade's power. The ghetto-dwellers become wilfully blind to the existence of the corpse: 'We made no reference to the body and we stopped using the word death' (230). By not mentioning death, it temporarily ceases to exist, just as the corpse seems to disappear because the public collectively agrees not to see it:

> We had all become afraid of the corpse. We were afraid of breathing in its air and its silence. We feared that it was spreading death in the atmosphere, sowing it in our eyes, reaping it in our dreams. And because we were so afraid and so cowardly, we stopped looking at the corpse. (230)

The thugs and Madame Koto are so powerful that the ghetto-dwellers refuse their duty to the dead man and *pretend* to be blind. This blindness then becomes real: 'We woke up one morning to find that a mysterious plague of blindness had struck our community after we had stopped seeing the dead body' (230-1). The two events are explicitly linked, implying that because the ghetto-dwellers have collectively decided not to see the body and do it justice, they are deprived of sight altogether, so their physical state comes to reflect accurately their attitude toward the unpleasant reality of the corpse. In this way, the community is shown to exhibit the 'heartlessness of human beings' bemoaned by Azaro at the beginning of *FR*.

Only when Dad learns a lesson from his blindness, that 'a good man first has to be blind before he can see' (241), and buries the carpenter, does the community recover from its blindness. In fact, the return of sight to the other ghetto-dwellers is portrayed as a direct result of the visions that Dad experiences during his blindness and expresses one night in the street. The ghetto-dwellers begins to cry out 'as at a universal revelation' (283). Azaro says that it is 'as if all the people who had been recently blinded, who had been tossing in their beds, willing dad on, had been simultaneously liberated into new vision' (284). The new vision given to the ghetto-dwellers through Dad's testimony to his own regained sight emphasises the importance of sharpened perception to all the members of the community. A link between vision and the visionary is invited by the texts, as will be explored in the Conclusion. However, to return to the focus of this chapter, it is necessary to examine the second significant feature of Azaro's
identity, the fluidity of his personal boundaries. Azaro’s experiences with the blind old man will demonstrate clearly that perception and the boundaries between self and other are linked in the texts.

D. THE FLUIDITY OF AZARO’S PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

From the very beginning of his life, Azaro encounters difficulty either in differentiating between himself and others or in keeping his own subjectivity unviolated by spirits or the blind old man. It is difficult to assess Azaro’s identity because he is unable to set boundaries between his life and that of others. Upon initial examination, the texts seem to suggest that these difficulties are most noticeable when he is young. In one of the few references to a specific age, Azaro recollects,

I was seven years old when I dreamt that my hands were covered with the yellow blood of a stranger. I had no idea whether these images belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was yet to come, or even if they were merely the host of images that invades the minds of all children. (7)

Azaro’s puzzlement as to his own visions shows that he is not in control of what he sees, nor able fully to understand it, and suggests that childhood gives access to more visions than an adulthood more focused on conventional reality. His life does not begin with birth, nor is it restricted to the physical self he presents to the world. He continues,

When I was very young I had a clear memory of my life stretching to other lives. There were no distinctions. Sometimes I seemed to be living several lives at once. One lifetime flowed into the others and all of them flowed into my childhood. (7)

Thus, as a child, a unique, autonomous identity is not permitted to him. He is not living only one life, nor is he only one person. Though the texts imply that Azaro is no longer so ‘very young’ and susceptible during the events of FR, there are numerous examples in the texts of Azaro’s self dissolving or of his personal boundaries being breached. His ‘self’ is essentially unstable, though he seems to have a concept of self that defies numerous reincarnations and experience of multiple lives. There is a certain continuity that allows Azaro to say, and the reader to understand, ‘I’ and ‘me’, though the exact nature of that ‘I’ and ‘me’ shifts throughout the texts. He is able to leave his own body and merge with natural phenomena or other beings.

Three further examples will demonstrate that Azaro’s being is liable to dissolution. Chapter II mentioned the situation with the female midget, in which ‘I was twirling, dizzy, my being in disintegration’ (460). This also happens to him in bed at night, when he experiments with leaving his body:
I seemed to scatter in all directions. I became leaves lashed by the winds of recurrence. [...] I tried to re-enter myself but seemed diverted into a tide of total night [...]. I felt myself falling with horrible acceleration into a dark well and just before I hit the bottom I noticed that I was falling into the face of a luminous moon. The whiteness swallowed me and turned to darkness. I burst out screaming. (188)

There are two significant facets to this experience. The first is that Azaro is transformed into leaves rather than a leaf, emphasising that he has become plural and fragmented when his spirit has been divorced from the body that keeps it all together. His predicament here echoes his inability to re-enter his body earlier in FR when his spirit-companions have lured him from his body. The second noteworthy element is the instability of the dark world in which he finds himself: The darkness changes to whiteness and then back again, increasing Azaro’s terror and stressing the mutability of Azaro and his world.

On the second occasion, Azaro disappears altogether:

It was when I wandered the road at night that I first became aware that sometimes I disappeared. At first it frightened me. I would be walking along, never able to see far, and then I would pass into the darkness. I would begin to look for myself. I became a dark ghost. The wind passed through me. But when I kicked a stone, or tripped, or when a light shone on me, I would become miraculously reconstituted. (353-4)

Images of dark and light recur in this instance; however, they are not interchangeable here. Rather, Azaro relies on the light to help him to reconstitute himself, as if his entire body has dissolved rather than the spirit being divided from the body. When he looks for himself, he finds nothing but a ‘dark ghost’, therefore he relies on contact with the external world in the form of a rock or a light to give him form. This is similar to the way in which Zahra’s face is recomposed by the Consul’s touch. These incidents suggest that, though he has decided to remain in the human world, Azaro’s subjectivity is tenuous: he is apt to disappear, to become something other, and to dissolve from the inside. He is understandably frightened by these events, but the ‘at first’ used in the above quotation is significant, because his attitude does shift over time, though his condition has not changed. For example, late in FR he notes:

It was the first time I realised that an invisible space had entered my mind and dissolved part of the interior structure of my being. The wind of several lives blew into my eyes. The lives stretched far back and when I saw the great king of the spirit-world staring at me through the open doors of my eyes I knew that many things were calling me. (446)
This more hopeful tone suggests that Azaro is able to reconcile himself to the liminal condition that leaves him vulnerable to dissolution and able to access multiple lives. With ‘part of the interior structure’ of his being dissolved, Azaro has the space within himself to allow the other lives to make a part of his own. As with the experience of the mask, however, Azaro does not view these disintegrations of his inner or outer being as wholly positive. The deciding factor that determines if these other lives are welcome is the element of choice: if Azaro is able to choose when he leaves and enters his body and how the ‘things calling him’ enter his life, he accepts and celebrates them. Choice is denied Azaro when the blind old man tries to appropriate his body and soul, and Azaro feels even more threatened than he does by the beast he sees through the mask.

E. THE BLIND OLD MAN

Azaro’s encounters with the blind old man bring together the ideas of perception being constitutive of identity and the instability of Azaro’s personal boundaries. Unlike Azaro’s experience with the mask, Azaro does not choose to see with the blind old man’s eyes; rather, the blind old man invades him without permission. The blind old man is presented as Azaro’s nemesis in the texts: he is not a character who learns anything from his blindness, nor does he take any comfort from it, therefore he is presented as the opposite of a visionary and hopeful character. He allies himself with the corrupt and menacing influences of the Party of the Rich and the Jackal-headed Masquerade. In this preference of the dark side, as it were, he may be contrasted with the Consul of NS, who tries to ‘faire de la cécité un atout’ and ‘ne la considère pas comme une infirmité’ (118) because it grants him access to the ‘pays fabuleux’.

On more than one occasion the blind old man tries to appropriate Azaro’s sight without Azaro’s consent. The first time, Azaro

waded in the origins of the road till I came to the red bungalow of the old man who was said to have been blinded by an angel. He sat outside in the rain, partly covered in a white shroud. He had a pipe in his mouth. He was staring through the rain, at the watery street, in ferocious concentration. Fascinated by his intensity, by the wavy image of him in the rain, his feet deep in murky waters, his red trousers soaked through, his green eyes clotted, I went closer. [...]

‘You, boy, come here, come and help an old man’.

‘To do what?’ I asked.

‘To see!’ (286-7)

The blind old man’s nefarious intention is to steal Azaro’s sight for his own, as he, unlike the Consul does not seem to have insight into a better world. Azaro soon begins to regret his curiosity:
As he pointed at me, his hand quivering, rain pouring from his eyes, changing their
colour to purple, a chill climbed my neck, and terror rooted me to the shifting ground.
The old man, raging, shouted in a quivering voice that he could see. He got up and
took a few quaking footsteps towards me, his face ugly with joy, the white shroud
falling from his shoulders. (287)

The instability of this situations, and its dangers, is suggested in the words ‘changing’ and
‘shifting’, ‘quivering’ and ‘quaking’. The ugliness of his joy implies the unholy pleasure he
achieves; this is not spiritually uplifting insight into Azaro’s character or the world to which he
has access. The after-effect for Azaro of the blind man’s attempt to steal his sight is to leave
him ‘both lost and blind’ (287), a similar consequence to that of wearing the mask. The blind
old man is more successful on the second occasion, and this time Azaro finds that his vision
has been appropriated:

Everything went dark. I tried to blink, but couldn’t. As if I had woken into a nightmare,

thick green substances passed over my eyes. They settled. Gradually, my eyes cleared.
When I looked out at the world again, what I saw made me scream. Everything was

upside-down. The world was small. Trees were like slow-moving giants. (313)

Thus, the blind old man’s inner world and Azaro’s have been exchanged, and Azaro finds that
everything the blind old man sees is ‘upside down’, just as the reality he encounters through the
eyes of the mask is completely different from the one he sees through his own eyes. Indeed,
another key difference between the French and English texts in this regard is that Zahra wishes
to be like the Consul, as she admires his way of understanding the world. So, in prison she
blindfolds herself, both to feel closer to him, and to attempt to gain similar insight into the
world. Azaro rejects utterly the vision of the blind old man because it perverts rather than
expands his own reality. And this time not only his eyes, but his personal boundaries are
affected. Azaro finds that

Something in me moved. I resisted. But the wind was stronger. The blind old man
laughed as I struggled. [...] I felt an inner self floating towards the blind old man. Or
was it that the blind old man was floating into me, invading my consciousness? I wasn’t
sure. (313)

The image of wind reappears here, emphasising its power over subjectivity. It is so effective
that Azaro himself has difficulty understanding which self belongs to him and which to the
blind old man, emphasising the idea that he is not a character who can easily identify what is
self and what is other. In terms of the reader’s understanding of the text, the very ambiguity of
the event serves an important purpose. Because Azaro himself does not fully understand the
situations, the reader is left rubbing her own eyes trying to see the events clearly. Therefore, the reader is placed in a similar position to Azaro because nothing in the text confirms what ‘really’ happened; this idea should be kept in mind, as it will be discussed at some length in the Conclusion.

Azaro consistently rejects any experience that will supplant his own experience of reality and welcomes those that add to it, just as he chooses to remain linked to the spirit world and the human world both. Through comparison of Azaro and his spirit-friend Ade, it is possible to reach significant conclusions about his reason for staying in the human world and choosing to sustain his liminal state, which will then be related to the allegorical reading of the text suggested in Chapters I and II.

F. ADE’S AND AZARO’S CHOICES

Though the beginning of FR states that Azaro has chosen to stay in the human world, he is sometimes tempted by his spirit-companions’ pleas and his memories of the beautiful ‘land of rainbows’ he has left behind by entering the human world. A moment of crisis may be seen in the one instance when Azaro deliberately chooses to act like a ‘normal’ spirit-child. When Azaro has been ‘wronged’ by his parents, he punishes them by starving himself. There is a seductive power in this, however, and he begins to ‘feed on his hunger’ (325), satisfying his appetite for tormenting his parents, if not his physical needs. After three days, ‘I began to leave the world. Everything became distant. I willed myself away, wanting to leave’ (325). It is on this occasion that he sinks ‘into the essential indifferent serenity of the spirit-child’s soul’ (326). Like the Consul, who notes that he and Zahra have no obligation to anyone living, Azaro’s abiku status apparently frees him from any obligation to stay in the human world. However, the three-headed spirit who comes to lead Azaro away is not as convincing as he originally seems to be, because when Azaro agrees to accompany him, he is shocked by the contrast between fantasy and reality:

Travelling suddenly became very difficult. My feet hurt, I was excruciatingly hungry, and with each step I felt like giving up. I had thought the journey to the other world would be an effortless one. (327)

There is a subversion of Azaro’s expectations in this experience; it has never occurred to him that his form of the Consul’s ‘délart volontaire’ could be painful or difficult. His problems are increased by the fact that the road he is travelling with the three-headed spirit ‘behaved like a river, and it flowed against the direction of our journey’ (327). The instability of this sudden transformation signals that the event relates to Azaro’s liminality, just as do the other episodes of Azaro’s fluid perception or compromised personal boundaries. The transformation of the road into a river is also significant because it is a reversal of the metamorphosis described at the
beginning of FR, ‘In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world’ (3). This suggests that Azaro is going back to his origins, the ‘beginnings’ before his birth in the spirit world. The shift from a solid, stable road to a river suggests that the ‘road’, either of the life cycle or the narrative, is unstable and moves in more than one direction. The Conclusion will pursue the connection between the road, river and story to further explore the way the reader is placed within the texts.

Azaro’s decision to leave the human world is an expression of his hurt at his parents’ punishment; his desire to return to the human world is inspired by his parents’ loving pleas for him to return, which offer him ‘water and food and new breathing’ (336), in conjunction with the herbalist’s treatment that allows to renew his choice to live in the human world. He has been ‘seduced’ by the idea of going back to the land of pure rainbows, and decides to leave the human world. However, when his expectations of the journey are thwarted, he reassesses his choice. Therefore, the journey with the three-headed spirit is significant in reinforcing Azaro’s choice to remain in the human world and also, as will be seen, in understanding the meaning of death in the novels.

Ade, an abiku like Azaro, does manage to sustain his ‘indifferent serenity’. He appears the first time before Azaro’s experience with the three-headed spirit, but disappears again until after Azaro has recovered from the journey, insisting that he had ‘never really left the world of the living’ (340). As he suddenly appears and disappears in the harmattan and then reappears in the rainy season, he is not shown to be born from his mother, nor to be connected with his parents in the way that Azaro is. In fact, Ade ‘was scared of his parents’ (370). The difference between the two children, who share the spirit heritage, is explored near the end of the text, when Ade spends the night at the home of Azaro’s family. When Ade’s father turns up to collect his child, his frightful temper does not unnerve Ade.

Ade did not want to stay any more, he did not like the weight of the world, the terror of the earth’s time. Love and the anguish of parents touched him only faintly, for beyond their stares and threats and beatings he knew that his parents’ guardianship was temporary. He always had a greater home. (486)

Unlike Azaro, Ade is linked only to the spirit world; he is merely passing through the human world, untouched by its beauty and suffering. Azaro’s choice to remain in the human world with his parents distinguishes him from Ade and his more typical spirit-companions still in the spirit world. Azaro’s journey with the three-headed spirit has served to show him how much he wanted to stay in the land of the living, so Ade’s rejection of it is all the more startling. Azaro says, ‘I never knew how different we both were till that morning’ (486). This realisation of Azaro’s difference from Ade leads him to articulate his own position more clearly than anywhere else in the book. Azaro’s choice is clear:
I was a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth’s life and contradictions. Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be. I was not necessarily the stronger one; it may be easier to live with the earth’s boundaries than to be free in infinity. (487)

Even Azaro’s discussion of his reasons for staying in the human world is paradoxical. Ade is said to want to be ‘free in the captivity of freedom’, whilst Azaro seeks the ‘liberty of limitations’. Yet, his message is very similar to the three-headed spirit’s assessment of death when Azaro is travelling with him. One of the groups they encounter has chosen to renounce eternity because they have become bored. The three-headed spirit says,

‘Heaven means different things to different people. They wanted to live, to be more alive. They wanted to know the essence of pain, they wanted to suffer, to feel, to love, to hate, to be greater than hate, and to be imperfect in order to always have something to strive towards, which is beauty. They wanted also to know wonder and to live miracles. Death is too perfect’. (329)

Even though the spirit world could fulfil every one of Azaro’s and Ade’s desires, it leaves them with nothing to strive toward; it, like death, is too perfect. The Consul’s own conclusion about the ‘pays fabuleux’ is similar: l’avoue que parfois tous ces mirages me fatiguent. Ils me harcèlent par leur beauté irréelle’ (NS 99). Therefore, though these worlds have their attractions, they are better for escapist fantasies than for permanent residence. The rejection of perfection is the essence of Azaro’s choice to remain in the human world. This significant choice is worthy of closer examination.

G. AZARO’S LIMINAL IDENTITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Before assessing the allegorical implications of Azaro’s life, which will be the concluding subject of this chapter, it is important to reach an understanding of the significance of his personal identity. Returning to Stuart Hall’s assessment of identity given in the Introduction, this chapter has demonstrated that Azaro’s identity is ‘never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions’ (1996: 3-4). Moreover, it is ‘constantly in the process of change and transformation’ (4). Indeed, Ato Quayson’s question is particularly valid in this regard: ‘If as is suggested in The Famished Road, the whole of reality is sited on a continually shifting conceptual space, is it not to suggest the impossibility of consolidating a sense of self and identity within such an arena?’ (1995: 153). Quayson’s answer to his own question is that the ‘novel attempts a partial resolution of such a conundrum in its narrative structure by drawing on mythopoeia and
continually gesturing to the sense of completion available in it, even if this is not completely available in the text' (1995: 154). Quayson uses mythopoeia in contrast to reality, suggesting that in the realm of myth, closure is possible in a way reality does not allow. While this is an interesting reading, in terms of an understanding of Azaro's identity, in my view the conundrum is not resolved, and this is the heart of the text's message. Azaro accepts and celebrates enigma; he manages to create a sense of identity without 'consolidating' it into only one form. The texts make it difficult to come to firm conclusions about Azaro's identity—his own conception of it and the reader's.

### i. AZARO'S SIGNIFICANCE

A brief look at some of the critical reactions to the texts is useful to an understanding of Azaro's liminality. Margaret Cezair-Thompson disagrees fundamentally with the notion that Azaro comes to celebrate the instability of his identity, maintaining that 'The formation of a new, steadfast identity is not only possible in The Famished Road; it is seen as a necessary, self-sustaining activity. For [Azaro], it is the sought after resolution of his “paradoxical soul”' (1996: 41). The problem with this otherwise compelling reading is that she does not show through textual evidence how this seemingly new identity is 'steadfast'. Azaro's choice to stay may be better interpreted as a choice to celebrate ambiguity and sustain his 'paradoxical soul'. To fulfil his abiku destiny would not be paradoxical, nor would it be so if he were to sever all links with the spirit world. This is clearly demonstrated by Azaro's words at the end of FR:

> Given the fact of the immortality of spirits, could these be the reason why I wanted to be born—these paradoxes of things, the eternal changes, the riddle of living while one is alive, the mystery of being, of births within births, deaths within births, births within dying, the challenge of giving birth to one's true self, to one's new spirit, till the conditions are right for the new immutable star within one's universe to come into existence; the challenge to grow and learn and love, to master one's self; the possibilities of a new pact with one's spirit; the probability that no injustice lasts for ever, no love ever dies, that no light is ever really extinguished, that no true road is ever complete, that no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final, and that there are never really any beginnings or endings? (487-8)

The immortality of spirits allows Azaro to have the visions, which in turn allows him to make the choice to stay, not to end the paradoxes, but to give birth to new ones because 'no truth is ever final', particularly as he wishes to 'live the earth's life and contradictions' (487). The emphasis on paradox and riddle is further emphasised by the fact that this is a question, rather than an answer. Neither Azaro nor the reader has absolute knowledge in this domain.
To relate Azaro’s identity explicitly to his liminality, Cezair-Thompson strongly argues that his choice to remain in the human world is a sign that at the beginning of *FR* ‘the “abiku” returns to the womb and, once born, chooses to bring his liminal existence to an end’ (1996: 41). Indeed, she suggests that

The numerous acts of recurrence within the novel […] are not a sign of the country’s unmitigable instability. They express a resolute, indefatigable quest for an inviolable form. This quest, which is expressed as Azaro’s desire ‘to remain’ and to replace his unstable existence as an ‘abiku’ with a more stable one, is the driving force of the novel. (1996: 40)

Putting the point about Nigeria’s stability aside for the moment, Cezair-Thompson’s view is clearly that by choosing to stay in the human world, Azaro ends his liminality, and that this choice is empowering to him. To support her argument, she uses his own words: ‘It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to remain forever in-between’ (*FR* 5). However, this expressed attitude toward the in-between is not sustained throughout the rest of the novel, nor does Azaro ever allow his spirit tokens to be dug up: his reaction to the herbalist who suggests it to his parents is one of hatred. In fact, Edna Aizenberg rightly suggests that Azaro ‘never resolves this “in-betweeness”, although the oppositional systems do permeate each other, and do provide a window of promise through their interpenetration’ (1995: 28). This choice has clearly demonstrated risks to Azaro, but he chooses to live with them and move beyond them.

It is in Azaro’s access to spirit and human realms, admittedly sometimes unwillingly, that the paradox of his existence is presented. Like Zahra, he resides in what may be termed a ‘potential space’, choosing elements from the more fixed spirit and human worlds and experiencing something entirely new. He states recognition that his quest for transformation, his rejection of fixed boundaries in *SE*, when his own unstable state is compared with that of the Jackal-headed Masquerade. In a perversion of the delights of the spirit world, Azaro finds that the world created by the Masquerade has ‘no tension, no poverty, no yearnings, no hunger’ (115). This vision of reality is, like death, too perfect. When confronting this totality, Azaro realises that ‘I would have to fight against it, never certain of succeeding, never sure of companionship possibly always betrayed by love […] without rest, and without the certainty of transformation’ (116). Hope compels him to choose this position of uncertainty and indeterminacy, and his connection with the spirit world gives him the drive to continue.

However, he accepts the pain resulting from such a choice; he prefers to struggle, to strive and to yearn rather than to stagnate in the spirit world. But within this choice to struggle, Azaro also guards his links to the spirit world because it does have something to offer him. Also in
SE, after Ade has finally succumbed to death, he visits Azaro, bringing with him a whiff of that perfect world. Azaro says that

my soul soared in the joy of angels, and I briefly re-connected the eternal playfulness of our mysterious inheritance. Then me and Ade began to play spirit-games, the games of enigma and riddles and jokes that we enjoyed so much in the land of origins. Ade brought the luminosity and wonderful lights of that world with him, and its beatific grace soothed me as I sat there in the raw world of our ghetto. And he, smiling like the moon, told jokes that made us roll over in laughter. (296)

The spirit world and its ‘innocent games’ give him his power, and his vision of how the world could be different, enables him to bear the ‘raw world of our ghetto’. His decision to stay in the human world marks his commitment to using those visions in order to better the lives of humans, as he says at the beginning of FR, to ‘make a valuable contribution’ (5) to the world. In this way, his choice of the potential space is anything but apolitical, as further work on the allegorical reading of the texts will now show.

ii. POSTCOLONIAL ALLEGORY

To return to a reading of Azaro’s character as an allegory for Nigeria, as the previous chapters have introduced, it is unsurprising that the ambiguity that characterises his identity also characterises such allegorical possibilities of the texts. Unlike ES, in which an allegorical interpretation is invited within the first thirty pages, the allegory between Azaro and Nigeria is not suggested until near the end of FR, and it is further removed from Azaro by Dad’s use of the more general term ‘spirit-child’. Dad asserts, ‘Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong. I won’t see it’ (478). The belated connection made by Dad between Nigeria and a spirit-child invites the reader to reinterpret the preceding pages of the text to take account of the political allegory, rather than setting it out at the beginning to shape the first reading of it; this is an interesting structural point, that suggests recircling, going back to the beginning for rebirth in a similar way to the transformation of the road back into the original river. Indeed, this statement is part of a whole series of prophecies to which Azaro responds, ‘You’re talking nonsense’ (478). In this way, though clear parallels may be drawn between the ‘coming and going’ of the spirit-child, and the political situation in Nigeria, which from Independence until 1999 lurched from military dictatorship to a democracy that was often indistinguishable from it,⁴ to read FR

⁴For an excellent short account of Nigeria’s troubled political situation since Independence, see Wole Soyinka, The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). The book was published before Olusegun Obasanjo’s astonishing return to power in 1999. Obasanjo’s democratic election has seemed to bring a new era of stability to Nigeria, though the fact that he was himself originally a military ruler in the 1970s, despite his later ‘conversion’ to democracy, may cause some scepticism (see Hausi 2000: 2).
and SE only in the light of this postulated connection would be to undermine the multiple layers of interpretation invited by the text. For, as Quayson notes, even in FR's putative historical grounding, history is problematized by the fact that, unlike most other references to [the Independence] period, the novel inscribes a sense of disillusionment into the events. It is as if the mood of post-Independence disillusionment is transferred onto the period before Independence when the mood was supposedly more euphoric and hopeful. (1997: 131)

Indeed, the texts are more critical of the Parties of the Rich and Poor, presumably composed of Nigerians in anticipation of the end of colonisation, than they are of the colonial powers. Therefore, a direct reading of Azaro's choices as symbolic for anti-colonial strategies in Nigeria is problematic, if not downright distracting. In fact, Jacqueline Bardolph asserts that 'the added dimension of the political allegory brings to bear an extra weight on the format that possibly brings distortions and difficult narrative contradictions' (1992: 46). The texts are full of enough riddles and paradoxes without adding the extra realm of political allegory. This is not entirely to dismiss the allegory invited by the texts, but rather to assert that it, too, is subject to the same inconsistencies and inconclusiveness of the rest of the text. Indeed, Cooper notes of West African fiction in general that

It seems to me that if this debate on the politics of magical realism has revealed anything clearly, it is the instability of the outcomes of these fictions. Whereas fiction embedded in myth, and particularly in the foundational myth of the nation, is bonded to a cyclical view of time, to a privileging of the recurrent over the historical linear, to the universal over the particular, magical realism can go, and is pulled, in many different ways, with varying consequences with regard to its politics. (1998: 32)

One such manifestation of the varying consequences of portraying politics through magical realism may be seen by closer examination of Azaro's and Zahra's 'magical' or supernatural visions and their political implications.

III. MAGICAL REALISM AND POLITICS IN FR AND NS

As suggested in the Introduction to this thesis, magical realism sometimes comes under suspicion by critics such as Kumkum Sangari for depoliticising pertinent social and political realities facing formerly colonised nations. The non-realist presentation of reality and often the de-emphasising of historical context may combine to avoid the effects of colonisation or neo-imperialism. In short, magical realist texts may be criticised on the same grounds as postmodern texts, for refusing to 'bear witness' to the 'unequal and uneven forces [...] within the modern world order' (Bhabha 1994: 171). A textually-based preliminary response to this accusation will
be given through examination of a scene from FR and another from NS in which an experience with the supernatural is shown directly affecting the political situation within the texts at the historical period between full colonial influence and full political independence. These visions do not occur in liminal locations; rather, they result from the delirium of physical illness, which is one of the factors affecting perception, as discussed earlier. During illness, rationality may be perceived to be compromised. However, in FR and NS, these visions give access to a reality that the authorities would rather keep hidden.

Azaro, a character who experiences visions at all times, is more susceptible to them when he is ill, and also less apt to trust them when he is ill than when healthy. For example, when he contracts malaria as a result of too much wandering in the forest, his ‘head was shot with heat and hallucinations’ (FR 120, my italics). He makes a distinction between these hallucinations and his sightings of spirits when healthy, which he is more likely to accept easily. For the reader, however, no such easy distinction can be made, as there is no fundamental difference in the presentation of these hallucinations or visions; the reader must rely on Azaro’s interpretation of the event to know if it is illusion or reality. Such reliance on a less than consistent narrator dramatically affects the reader’s experience of the novel, as the Conclusion to the thesis will demonstrate.

The vision of political relevance occurs when Azaro is recovering from malaria. Whilst in bed, he hears noises: ‘The voices were so magnified that I wondered what sort of human beings produced them. I couldn’t hear what they said. I felt I was imagining them, that they were another manifestation of the spirits’ (122). He does not immediately believe his own ears, as he has not experienced such sounds in the human context. Later, however, they are revealed to be the voices of the Party of the Rich distorted by loudspeakers, the novelty of this artificial amplification of voices much more extraordinary to Azaro than the spirits. Azaro’s hallucinations have a clearer meaning that evening, after the politicians have distributed the powdered milk. Azaro says,

I was still feverish and the darkness quivered with figures moving about blindly. Just before I fell asleep I heard a noise on the cupboard and as I looked I saw something growing out of the milk. It grew very tall and white and resolved itself into a ghostly agbada. There was no one in the agbada and it took off from the powdered milk and flew around the room. Then the garment, all white, folded itself, compacted, and settled into the form of a bright indigo dragonfly. It buzzed its wings round the room and disappeared into the impenetrable darkness of a corner. My headache grew more severe. (127)

Though occurring under the influence of fever, the vision is revelatory and saving. The milk is tainted and all the families in the compound who consume it become violently ill. Because
Azaro tells his parents of his vision, his family is spared and the severity of the situation is curtailed for the rest of the people in their compound. The vision is also the impetus for one of the few ghetto rebellions against the corrupt politicians. When the politicians return, the compound dwellers revolt:

the women howled and the men hurled stones, breaking the side windows and shattering the windscreen. The crowd surged to the front of the van, preventing it from moving. The thugs jumped down and whipped people, the photographer frenziedly took pictures, and the people went on stoning the side windows till they gave completely and then they threw rocks at the men handing out the garri. (154)

Thus, Azaro’s feverish vision leads to a real, though temporary, change in ghetto life, suggesting that connections with the spirit world can have serious political implications, empowering the disenfranchised. Azaro’s desire to learn how to see includes looking beneath the surface at what is festering there, using his special perception to reveal truths that are unpalatable, in this case, literally so.

A similar situation of physical weakness inducing revelatory visions occurs in NS. Zahra’s true ‘circumcision’ by her sisters while serving her prison term does not receive immediate medical attention and she falls ill. This physical infirmity leads her to visions. She says, ‘Durant plus d’un moit j’étais perdue, égarée, sans repères, folle, déroutant la nuit, fiévreuse, au bord de tous les abîmes’ (160). She is at the edge of the abyss—of madness, illness and suffering. This is certainly a liminal state ‘betwixt and between’ living and dying, madness and sanity, with no ‘points de repères’. This position on the precipice of sanity brings her closer to the spirit world by leading her to ‘poursuivre[re] mes errances nocturnes plus pour échapper à la douleur que pour faire de nouvelles rencontres’ (161). Her pain needs distraction, thus she continues her journey to the ‘pays fabuleux’ to which the Consul has introduced her. Significantly, this vision is set apart from her other ‘rencontres’ because of its political implications. She meets a man in a hangar who tells her:

—Tous ceux que vous voyez ici étaient des gens pauvres, des mendiantes, des clochards, des malades. Ici, vous êtes dans la grande salle de la foire pour animaux. Un jour, l’ordre fut donné de nettoyer la ville, parce qu’un visiteur important, un étranger allait faire quelques pas dans les rues. Nous étions le visage sale et indésirable du pays. Il fallait effacer cette image, exiler cette population, la faire disparaître, du moins momentanément, juste durant les quelques jours de la visite de l’étranger. L’ordre fut exécuté. [...] Je suis le dernier survivant, celui qui devrait disparaître parce que son témoignage est terrible. Rapportez ces paroles. Racontez à tout le monde ce que vous avez vu ici. Ce n’est pas un cauchemar. Nous ne sommes pas des fantômes. (162)
Zahra’s vision of political repression and dishonesty, facilitated by her previous experience with the ‘pays fabuleux’, results from the liminal ambiguity of illness and fever. Had the vision been unsubstantiated, these marginalised citizens could simply be read as symbolic manifestations of Zahra’s own marginality and pain, her own state of being ‘sale et indésirable’ in the eyes of her sisters and her father. Yet, just as Azaro’s vision provides the solution to the mysterious poisoning in his quarter, Zahra’s uncovers the suffering of other, real, marginalised and forgotten characters. Her doctor tells her,

Cette histoire, vous ne l’avez peut-être pas vécue, mais elle est vraie. La police avait enfermé des mendiantes et puis elle les a oubliées. La presse n’en a pas parlé [...] Ce qui m’étonne c’est le rapport entre vos souffrances et cette histoire... (165)

She intimately understands pain and is in a position of ambiguity and compromised physical health, which gives her access to another world. She responds to the doctor, ‘Disons qu’une grande douleur me procure une lucidité au seuil de la voyance’ (165). Zahra suggests herself that her suffering has allowed the boundaries between the spirit and human worlds, and between appearance and reality, to be temporarily erased. Her use of the world ‘seuil’ only emphasise her liminality: she is on the threshold of clairvoyance because of her physical condition. She explains, ‘Mes douleurs aiguës m’avaient entraînée là. J’étais éveillée, et c’était là une vision. Tout était vrai’ (162). Therefore, in the texts, far from being a separate realm from the political arena, the supernatural or spirit world becomes a way of accessing a distasteful political reality. In each case, a close encounter of the supernatural kind reveals a hidden political reality.

This textual evidence of the ways in which the spirit world is not merely an escape from harsh realities in the human world demonstrates the potential for magical realist texts to bear witness to political reality. Just as they reveal another dimension of reality hidden from common perception, they allow access to another, deliberately concealed, set of political truths. The techniques of magical realism are, in fact, a way of revealing the painful truth of the most marginalised citizens in these communities. Indeed, despite her reservations about the ultimate political meaning of FR, Brenda Cooper argues that

The plots of [West African magical realist] fictions deal with issues of borders, change, mixing and syncretizing. And they do so, and this point is critical, in order to expose what they see as a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would bring to view. (1998: 32)

The examples from the English and French texts demonstrate the validity of this assessment for all four texts under discussion in this thesis and also suggest the direction that the Conclusion discussion will take: the effect of the authors’ narrative strategies on the reader.
The present chapter has shown that at least one component of Azaro's and Zahra's liminality is manifested in a special relationship with some kind of spirit world—the afterlife or a 'pays fabuleux'. In approaching Azaro's liminal identity, which is presented in a wholly different way from Zahra's in ES and NS, it has been useful to focus on two principal areas: personal boundaries and perception. Examination of these related aspects of Azaro's character has shown that, though he chooses to remain in the human world, he does not seek to end his liminality. Indeed, it is his liminality that gives him the vision necessary to making any kind of difference in the human world. However, in addition to political allegory, which is not wholly satisfactory in the English texts, further fruitful ways of interpreting Azaro's and Zahra's choices can be suggested. The Conclusion will approach these other possible interpretations by returning to the issues raised in the Introduction and showing how the close reading undertaken in this thesis has begun to answer them.
CONCLUSION

The strategy of detailed textual analysis employed throughout the main chapters of this thesis has yielded significant conclusions about Azaro’s and Zahra’s identity, especially, their choice of the ‘potential space’ of liminality over a fixed identity that corresponds to cultural or biological expectations. Close reading has also raised questions about the broader issues of identity and postcolonial studies. The aim of this Conclusion is to examine the larger picture of the texts and their contexts to begin to answer these questions, but the emphasis on reading and, in particular the reader, will necessarily remain central to the analytical framework.

In order to clarify the emphasis on the reader and reading in the following discussion, it is useful to return to two key ideas raised in the Introduction to this thesis. The first of these is Langdon Elsbree’s proposed ‘homology’ between rites of passage and narrative. He argues that

the three phases [of van Gennep’s ‘schema’]—separation, liminality, and incorporation—enact a powerful homology of our personal sense of beginnings, transitions, and endings in life and literature. To put this another way, narratives often have the felt presence of structure because our experience and experiences often have the felt presence of structure. We can distinguish beginnings (separations), middles (liminal transitions) and endings (incorporations) because of these homologous relationships. (1991: 16)

In applying this to the narratives of Azaro’s and Zahra’s lives, it is possible to build upon the individual’s recognition of ‘felt structure’ in life and the reader’s recognition and often expectation of ‘felt structure’ in narrative: Azaro’s and Zahra’s experience of beginnings, middles and endings is paralleled by the reader’s experience of them in the narratives. Such a ‘homology’ has enormous potential to deepen understanding of the texts because, since Azaro and Zahra have not moved away from their own liminal phase, the reader is not given the expected ‘felt structure’ of all three phases. The reader is, therefore, also thrust into the position of liminality, whether or not she likes it (and it will be seen that some critics clearly do not). The proposition that the reader, like Azaro and Zahra, is a liminar, deserves further attention and exploration. In order to do this, the discussion will begin by following up the second relevant point from the Introduction, that of the texts’ classification as Bildungsromane.

The Introduction suggested that, with some reservations, Azaro’s and Zahra’s stories may be seen as belonging to the genre of the Bildungsroman, coming of age novels in which

the world plays the role of moulder, marking and maturing the protagonist to the point where he can finally make a personal choice out of what is available to him, adopting an individual attitude towards life. (Nyatetu-Waigwa 1996: 1)
The conventional Bildungroman has a clear structure akin to that of rites of passage; in fact, the protagonist of a coming of age novel often goes through explicit or implicit rites of passage in order to reach the final 'end' of successful adulthood. To the extent that that Azaro and Zahra make a personal choice and adopt an individual stance to life, their stories may be treated as belonging to this genre. For example, Jacqueline Bardolph argues that, ultimately, FR follows 'the expected pattern' of the genre by recreating for the reader 'the passage from the delights of early vision to the sobering stages of growing up, from magic gifts to a prosaic assessment of limits' (1992: 47). However, the previous chapters have demonstrated that the 'prosaic assessment' she perceives is actually a celebration of the ability of limits to provide greater freedom—a paradox, in fact, that Azaro accepts with pleasure because he can achieve more in the human world than living among the spirits. As for Zahra, her emphasis on 'play' at the end of NS shows more delight than any moment of her childhood depicted in the texts. Not only do Azaro and Zahra create something more than what is seemingly available to them, they are presented as beings with continually transforming identities, who do not reach the 'ending' of their socially-recognised rites of passage. According to Nyatetu-Waigwa's analysis, this makes the four novels that recount their stories 'liminal' novels of coming of age in which the rite of passage either overtly depicted [...] or implicitly invoked [...] remains suspended in the middle stage. At the close of the novel, the protagonist is still in the middle of the quest, either still moving towards what supposedly constitutes the final stage in that quest or having consciously suspended the adoption of a final stance. (1996: 3)

Therefore, because the final stage of the rite of passage is suspended for Azaro and Zahra, it is also suspended for the reader because, as will become clear, the narrative strategies employed by Okri and Ben Jelloun explicitly parallel the liminal state of their protagonists. Azaro and Zahra reject the fixity of a final stance, as do their authors. This forces the reader to do without it, too. The remainder of the Conclusion will be devoted to exploration of how this is done and how, if the reader is placed in a liminal state, the texts also suggests that the artist, particularly the postcolonial artist, is also liminal. First of all, a brief re-examination of Azaro's and Zahra's liminality will give the necessary context to the discussion of the reader as liminal.

References to enigmas, paradoxes and riddles recur in the texts and provide vital clues to the understanding of Zahra's and Azaro's identities and of the texts themselves. When examining these references it is important to keep in mind Ben Jelloun's observation in a recent interview that 'Le style n'est jamais indépendant de l'histoire, comme un pinceau il suit le modèle des visages' (Argand 1999: 30). There is, therefore, an explicit link made between the content of the story and the way it is told.
I. THE ENIGMA

The enigma or paradox is the image that best encapsulates not only Azaro’s and Zahra’s individual identities but also the narrative style of the texts used to signify them, all of which elude complete understanding. One such enigma is Azaro’s reaction to his birth. Given that he, as an ahiku is meant to consider birth as exile from Paradise, it is hardly surprising that ‘it remains an enigma how it came to be that I was born smiling’ (FR 6). This enigma is never resolved or explained, indeed, the mystery of his birth is developed through the refrain of Azaro’s secrets. In each case the reference to his secrets occurs after some experience of spirits or the spirit world that Azaro is loath to share with adults. After escaping one attempt by the spirits to abduct him, Azaro, who has still somehow managed to arrive home ‘just in time’ to completely unaware parents, says that ‘I curled up on the mat, planting my secrets in my silence, and slept as if nothing unusual had happened’ (140). After wandering through the market and being drugged by an old man, ultimately seeing ‘Mum in the woman I hadn’t recognised’, he again ‘planted my secrets in my silence’ (170). Finally, after his terrifying experience with the mask that gives him a vision of an alternate world, ‘I stayed outside for awhile, planting my secrets in the silence of my beginnings’ (249). These references to planting his secrets in silence, hence mysterious, beginnings strongly echo the beginning of FR, in which Azaro buries his spirit tokens, planting them in the earth so he will remain linked to the spirit world. There is something in his identity that is unknowable, even to Azaro, that must nevertheless be protected and should not be subjected to the dissolutions and boundary violations to which the rest of his self are prone, as Chapter III demonstrated. The repeated sowing of his secrets also suggests the nurturing of these secrets, that they may later bear fruit; the fruit of Azaro’s mysterious beginnings will be the ‘valuable contribution’ he can make to his world, as will be seen. Azaro both derives power from his secrets, and protects them from discovery. Neither any other character in the text nor the reader are privy to the exact nature of Azaro’s secrets, only to the knowledge that they exist, thus ensuring that he, and they, remain enigmatic. This element of mystery also pervades characters’ and readers’ understanding of Zahra.

Zahra’s character is presented as enigmatic throughout ES and NS, but the nature of the enigma shifts, further emphasising her ambiguity. The enigma of her identity is first and foremost related to her decision to remain in the unstable potential space between the more fixed social expectations of either biological femininity or culturally-conferred masculinity. This aspect of the enigma is portrayed as positive. In NS Zahra says, ‘j’ai vaincu toutes les violences pour mériter la passion et être une énigme’ (6). Thus, the fact of being an enigma is portrayed as a reward for suffering. The second facet of the enigma is that the texts do not allow the reader certainty that the enigmatic figure described is even Zahra. In other words, even identifying a given character is problematic in the texts; the reader is given fairly obvious clues but no absolute confirmation. For example, Chapter One of ES is entitled ‘Homme’ and describes the end of a
man's life. This man is described as having a 'présence autoritaire et énigmatique' (8) and seeming to have lived a troubled life like Zahra's. Another enigmatic figure appears in the blind troubadour's narrative near the end of E5, this time a woman. The blind troubadour describes her as 'un personnage ou plutôt une énigme, deux visages d'un même être complètement embourbé dans une histoire inachevée, une histoire sur l'ambiguïté et la fuite!' (178). The storyteller's use of 'personnage' in lieu of 'personne' emphasises the connection with narrative, as the word 'personnage' usually means a fictional character. That this particular character could be Zahra is clearly suggested though never confirmed through the troubadour's comment firstly that she is 'probablement arabe, en tout cas de culture islamique' (174), and more positively that she has a particularly unusual voice, which he describes as 'grave et aiguë en même temps' (174).

The difficulty in identifying the gender of the speaker by the voice echoes Zahra's struggle to find a speaking voice to represent her ever-changing identity accurately.

The difficulty of fully understanding or decoding these two characters has significant effects on the other characters in the novels and on the reader. For the most part, Azaro's community chooses to ignore his mysterious qualities, partly because to recognise that his enigma is linked to his spirit identity would force them to take action to bring an end to the situation, but more compellingly because, throughout the texts, the community seems to accept that not everything is absolutely comprehensible. Awolalu notes of the Yoruba generally that they 'do not attempt to solve the ultimate problems confronting them by one coherent theory. They are happy to employ a variety of approaches and are not easily conscious of contradictions' (1979: 58). Such an acceptance of enigma or paradox is evident in FR through the motif of the riddle, repeated throughout FR and unsolved in SE, though it is not further developed in that novel. Azaro finds existence to be composed of riddles that only the dead (32 and 75), or not even the dead can answer (229). In fact, there are 'many riddles of the dead that only the living can answer' (427). This refrain culminates in the assertion on page 488 that 'anything is possible, one way or another. There are many riddles amongst us that neither the living nor the dead can answer'. Azaro accepts these riddles with equanimity; he does not even try to solve them. Paradoxically, the answer to the riddles seem to be the recognition and celebration that they are unanswerable. This acceptance of the unknowable may be seen in his discovery in FR that we can look out of our eyes, out of our inner worlds at people, but that people, looking at us couldn't see into our eyes, our thoughts, our inner worlds. How transparent one feels, but how opaque: it mystified me. (342)

At first glance, this suggests that Azaro laments the fact that his own perceived transparency is only perceived as opacity by others. However, when faced with this paradox, he 'hugged the alarming mystery of reality, and grew stronger' (342). This strength points to the potential
benefits of opacity, as the political discussion below will outline. In this way, the text suggests, but does not emphasise the drawbacks of a lack of resolution.

Zahra’s enigmatic qualities and those of the ‘Zahra figures’ in the texts, has a more obviously disturbing effect on other characters within the texts. The Consul says, ‘Il m’arrive de crier sans m’en rendre compte: “Qui êtes-vous?”’ (NS 170), while a woman who claims to have been the niece of a figure resembling Zahra expresses ‘le besoin d’être délivrée du poids de cette énigme’ (ES 207). The suggestion that enigmas are weighty things implies that it takes strength to accept riddles that have no answer; this is a valuable reminder for the reader of these challenging texts, which may, themselves, be seen to be riddles.

As Maggi Phillips points out, ‘By their nature, riddles embody an inherent ambiguity and posit a multiplicity of interpretations’ (1992: 172). It is possible to read the whole of FR and ES and, to a lesser extent, SE and NS as riddles, full of the ‘transformative spaces’ identified by Kumkum Sangari in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ use of the enigma that do not ‘readily give up their meaning’ (1995: 144). The narrative techniques employed by each author will be examined to assess the position in which they place the reader and develop this discussion of riddles and enigmas. It will be proposed that the texts do not provide conventional ‘closure’, that they denounce the idea of one absolute truth in writing and that they allow ‘other’ kinds of writing such as oral narrative and dream to coexist with the more straightforward narrative. These techniques engage the reader in the ‘riddle’, by placing her within the liminal space of the texts and refusing to release her with a clear answer, thereby forcing her to share the protagonist’s liminality to some extent. These narrative strategies will then be linked to the debate raised in the Introduction about the necessity of distinguishing the postcolonial from the postmodern. A preliminary conclusion about where it is most useful to situate Okri and Ben Jelloun in this debate will be drawn, based on examination of the political implications of such narrative strategies. And finally, as Chapters II and III suggested that the four texts in question do not reveal their full significance if they are read only as allegories of the nations in which they are set, another kind of allegory between the protagonists and their authors will be suggested.

II. RIDDLE AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

The presentation of Azaro’s and Zahra’s lives is as open-ended as their identities are shown to be. This made explicit by the Consul, who describes his experience with Zahra’s story in a way that emphasises that her liminal identity affects the way her story can be told and understood:
A link may be made here between the secrets that Azaro buries and the secret that symbolises Zahra for the Consul. The Consul seeks deliverance through closure of the story, but recognises that it is unlikely because of the enigmatic quality of both Zahra and her story. Because Zahra’s identity continually slips beyond categorisation, and because she is in a state of continual evolution, her story is not one that suits the conventions of a neat ending after a clear beginning and middle. Azaro’s question near the end of FR has similar implications. He asks if his choice to stay among the Living is based on the likelihood ‘that no true road is ever complete, that no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final, and that there are never really any beginnings or endings?’ (488). His use of a question mark makes his speculation like a riddle, one which neither the living nor the dead, character nor reader can answer. That there are ‘never really any beginnings or endings’ is of particular relevance to Azaro’s own story and its beginnings before birth and beyond death, though he seems to see that all stories, lives, or events are beyond the kinds of boundaries that humans place on them, believing them to be real. At one point in FR he ‘wept in advance for all the things that would happen, the unimaginable things beyond the horizon of all the narratives of our lives’ (229). Thus, the enigma that characterises Azaro and Zahra also characterises the four novels. These texts are, to use an apt phrase of Derrida’s, ‘always, already’ liminal, ever slipping through or eluding definitive interpretations. Indeed, as Phillips in her article, ‘Ben Okri’s River Narratives: The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment’, asserts:

riddles can be seen to forge a system of knowledge—or a narrative cosmos—which incorporates a sense of infinite possibility and, contrarily, maintains a cohesive flux within the system. This system, in other words, encompasses both centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. Once again, the textual effect produced by the use of riddles privileges fluidity in the form of a mutable and, in Okri’s terms, a transformative energy. (1997: 173)

The constant search for transformation propels Azaro’s and Zahra’s stories, though each also undergoes temporary or partial transformations that are not of their own choosing. The prevalence of the riddle motif in the texts indicates that, though not every interpretation of the texts is equally valid, it is not possible to fix the characters or the texts to one identity or meaning. The reason the reader is left in the liminal state in the texts is that the texts do not provide any
CONCLUSION

sense of closure, nor do they follow a conventionally linear trajectory, despite the fact that narrative, particularly written narrative, gives rise to expectations of closure.

The impulse to narrate is explicated by Iris Murdoch, who observes, 'Any story which we tell ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete' (1970: 166). This position is advanced by Langdon Elsbree, who describes

the homology between ritual passage and narrative structures as an instance of a larger relationship. This relationship is the human propensity for closure as the grounds for hope. In life and art alike, we look for the end of certain phases, events, or passages so that they are behind us and so that we have reason to trust the new identity will suffice for other passages. (1991: 165)

Such a desire for an end to a given phase is important to understanding postcolonial allegory, as this chapter will show. This is especially, if not exclusively, true of stories told in literate cultures. Transforming a life into narrative gives it structure, order and apparent meaning, even if only temporarily. The suggestion that life is a narrative told to make sense of something that is 'chancy and incomplete' is made in Zahra's description of the Consul's reaction to her story:

Mon histoire le fit sourire. Pour lui, c'était un conte que j'avais inventé pour traverser les vingt premières années de la vie, une histoire sortie de l'imagination d'un enfant qui devait s'ennuyer et qui avait préféré s'engager dans le jeu entre le sérieux et le rire. (NS 133)

Thus, life narrative is considered by the Consul to be a game to avoid boredom, though for Zahra the consequences of this story are more closely related to 'le sérieux' than 'le rire'. Narrative and a desire for closure are also linked by the ambiguous figure at the beginning of ES (who may or may not be Zahra), when 'he' expresses a need to 'faire le point sur tout ce qui avait précédé et de préparer son départ définitif vers le territoire du silence suprême' (10). Death is the opportunity to come to some conclusions and give more definitive meaning to a life story that cannot have any form of closure until death, and even then eludes explanation. The connection between death and narrative is implicit in the use of 'faire le point'. 'Faire le point' means to take stock of a situation, but because 'le point' is also a grammatical term, the image contains the idea of putting the full stop at the end of a sentence or, to extrapolate, a life narrative.

A desire for closure is also experienced not only by Azaro and Zahra, but by those members of their communities who would like to define these characters in order to control them, and readers who have been led to expect such closure. Such a desire is exemplified by Zahra's experience in the hammam in ES. Young Zahra finds that
Le plafond était comme un tableau ou une planche d'écriture. Tout ce qui s'y dessinait n'était pas forcément intelligible. Mais, comme il fallait bien passer le temps, je me chargeais de débrouiller tous ces fils et d'en sortir quelque chose de compréhensible. (34)

In her use of story-making to pass the time in the hammam, Zahra is not so far removed from the child the Consul imagines making up her incredible life story out of boredom. However, the significance of the act is more than mere time-killing or amusement: this move to make sense of the unintelligible is the impulse to narrate, to transform life into a story, to bring order to chaos.

However, a key exchange between Mum and Dad in SE shows that there is more than one way to interpret the purpose of stories. The impulse to narrate and be narrated are multifaceted:

‘Your story isn’t going anywhere,’ mum said, in the dark.

‘A story is not a car,’ dad replied. ‘It is a road, and before that it was a river, a river that never ends.’ (266)

Mum, ‘in the dark’ both literally and figuratively, is frustrated by the apparently aimless progression of Dad’s story, but Dad looks at stories in a significantly different way, connecting them with the river and road imagery that begins FR. This meaningful connection implies that, like the road that suddenly changes to a river and flows against the direction of Azaro’s journey to the spirit world with the three-headed spirit, a story is not necessarily stable, flowing in only one direction, with only one destination in mind. A story, Dad suggests, can never end, just as the river is without end. This definition of story is radically different from one that privileges linear narrative and closure, and echoes Okri’s own purpose in writing FR, to ‘write an unfixed book, a river’ (Wilkinson 1991: 88). However, this unfixed quality has its drawbacks. The desire for closure may be seen in Azaro’s own momentary ‘terrible hunger for a destination’ (FR 113). Ultimately, however, closure is denied and Azaro comes to terms with its lack and even celebrates it. In order to understand how a reader’s desire for closure is thwarted in all four texts, the discussion will now move to show how the texts reject presentation of one absolute truth.

In ES, the univocal account of Zahra’s story breaks down because the original storyteller disappears, and with him, the journal of which most of his story was composed in the middle chapters of the novel. In the absence of this storyteller, three particularly keen listeners, Salem, Amar and Fatouma decide to provide their own sense of closure to the story by each offering their own version of Zahra’s end. Each claims to know the real end of the story and none of their versions agree. Salem’s story, a tale of violence and brutality that sees Zahra killing her rapist, Abbas, at the ‘cirque forain’, is perceived by Amar to be nothing more than the fulfillment of Salem’s own fantasies. By contrast, he claims to have found ‘le manuscrit que nous lisait le conteur’ (144), and uses this as proof of his veracity. Amar, who reverts to the name ‘Ahmed’
and the male pronoun, refusing to call the character ‘Zahra’, avows that the episode with the travelling circus never occurred; rather, ‘Ahmed’ dies in ‘une grande douceur’ (159), still in isolation at the family home. Fatouma’s story is the most provocative, as she suggests that she is Zahra. That her name is a version of ‘Fatima’ and the first name of the daughter of the Prophet, Fatima Zahra, adds credibility to her account, suggesting that either she is Zahra, or yet another of her doubles. Unlike Salem’s and Amar’s stories, of course, Fatouma’s does not end with death, does not truly end at all, both because her life is not yet over, and because the blind troubadour intervenes while Amar and Salem ‘méditaient encore l’histoire de Fatouma’ (171). The blind troubadour seems to be the original storyteller returned, but this tale, too, is superseded by that of the man in the blue turban, whose version of the end the story, upon which ES closes, does nothing to answer the questions raised in the text by the other versions of Zahra’s life. In fact, the man in the blue turban’s is an account of the story’s origins rather than a definitive account of its end; the writing in the book disappears:

Lorsque le livre fut vidé de ses écritures par la pleine lune, j’eus peur au début, mais ce fut là les premiers signes de ma délivrance. J’ai moi aussi tout oublié. Si quelqu’un parmi vous tient à connaître la suite de cette histoire, il devra interroger la lune quand elle sera entièrement pleine. Moi, je dépose là devant vous le livre, l’encier et le porte-plume. Je m’en vais lire le Coran sur la tombe des morts! (208-9)

When the fixed story, inscribed in the book, disappears, dissolving into nothingness, the storyteller finds it terrifying only at first. Ultimately, he finds it more liberating than linear narrative, if only because forgetfulness is preferable to the discomfort or imprisonment inspired by Zahra’s unfinishable story. His liberation effected by the erasure of the text is reminiscent of that experienced by Zahra once she has fully embraced her identity as an enigma. However, his return to the Koran, a sacred and thus inviolable text, does imply that after a brush with such a difficult and unresolved story it is tempting to return to apparently more stable texts, though, like Zahra’s story, religious texts such as the Koran make themselves available to multiple interpretations, as the existence of many schools of Koranic scholarship attests. At the moment of the storyteller’s liberation, both the fictional storyteller and the author Tahar Ben Jelloun deliver the story completely into the hands of the audiences, the listeners in the square and readers of the text by focusing on that audience’s desire for a ‘suite’ to the story and how this may be fulfilled, though his advice to ask the full moon is hardly conventional. Because of this placement of the story into the power of its audience, a sense of closure is explicitly undermined. Further ambiguity is introduced to the situation because the storyteller indicates that there could

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1This is clearly echoed in statements by Ben Jelloun in his interview with Thomas Spear, in which he explains that it is because Arabic is the language of the Koran that he finds he cannot ‘do violence’ to it, and thus chooses French (Spear 1993: 34).
be a 'suite' to the story, whereas by rights this should not be possible because the first chapter indicates that the character who may be Zahra is dying or dead.

FR is just as ambiguous as ES. The novel is comprised of apparently repetitive experiences. Cooper comments that FR does not have 'a full and busy plot. [...] Okri's [novel] is elusive because of its insubstantiality. Not much happens. What does transpire seems familiar and repetitive, as though one is living through many versions of the same dream or nightmare' (1998: 68). These versions are those of poverty, unrest, and pursuit by Azaro's spirit companions. They include encounters with spirits in the forest and Dad's boxing matches with various opponents. Events can easily become confused and conflated. If, in Zahra's case, the problem is which version to believe, in Okri's, it is separating the different events which seem almost identical. After 500 pages, the novel comes to an end with the words, 'A dream can be the highest point of a life' (500). Like the ending of ES, this is, at best, enigmatic (at worst, infuriating). Another of Dad's fights and long recoveries has preceded it, but the 'good breeze' Azaro felt blowing through their lives 'hadn't lasted forever' (500). Nothing has been resolved and what had been pending, such as the political rally, is still pending. Azaro's liminality has not been ended as the herbalist has never succeeded in digging up Azaro's spirit tokens. There is no obvious reason why the story should end at this point rather than any other. The reader is left with the possibility of reading the whole text as a dream. In each case, the reader may choose to focus on liberation and interpret the dream as the transformative event that makes life bearable rather than as something which exposes a dreary arbitrariness to life and narrative. That Azaro and the storyteller in ES are themselves seen to be at peace with the situation, despite its instability, invites the reader to have a similar feeling of hope.

That there is a sequel to ES and FR also demonstrates a lack of closure. As suggested earlier, the very existence of NS is puzzling if the reader believes the accounts of Zahra's death in ES or the gift of the story to the reader by the storyteller. The first words of the preface seem straightforward and reassuring, 'Ce qui importe c'est la vérité' (5), but this is quickly undermined by difficulty in definitively identifying the speaker, as suggested earlier. After a few pages of ambiguity, the account does settle down to a more conventional first-person narration, ostensibly by Zahra. As with FR and SE, however, it is not clear at what moment in her life Zahra is recounting the story. Is she 'in' the story, or writing from a retrospective position with the distance of many years? In comparing the end of ES and the beginning of NS, there are no neatly tied-up endings or any clean-cut beginnings. The reader has jumped into the middle of a circle that has no end and no beginning—the storyteller's circle, which Zahra links to 'la folie' (6). Events of one text overlap with or seem to cancel out the other, thus neither printed text has ownership of the 'truth', despite Zahra's desire to reclaim the story. Her own words undermine the ability of NS to replace or deny everything recounted in ES. Robert Elbaz' comments about
the prevalence of the 'series' in Maghrebi writing sheds light both on the importance of the apparent repetitions and contradictions in *NS* and the repetitions in *FR* and *SE*:

La série, nous la retrouvons partout dans le roman maghrébin, et qui dit série, dit procès de répétition. Les mêmes éléments narratifs, ces éléments sériels, sont repris et répétés indéfiniment. Le procès de production s'apuirit sur le jeu variable et indéfini de la répétition d'un récit qui n'est jamais totalement raconté, mais qui, dans cette intervalle indéterminée, instaure une série de commencements narratifs sans cesse renouvelés [...] la version définitive ne nous est jamais fournie, étant donné que le roman est obsédé par ses objets narratifs dont il ne peut se détacher. Ce qui motive, d'ailleurs, le mouvement circulaire du texte pour se lui-même. (1996: 8)

Elbaz suggests that the whole story can never be told, but that there is a need to keep attempting to tell it, echoing the impulse to narrate discussed earlier. Narrative provides hope of catharsis through the experience of climax and dénouement; these stories never fully reach this catharsis in terms of their events, and Elbaz would suggest that this is because the Maghrebi writers he discusses, particularly Ben Jelloun, are still coping with the trauma of colonisation. The extent to which hope is invited or denied by these texts will receive further examination below, after the relationship between *FR* and *SE* has been discussed.

Because of the apparently random quality of the ending of *FR*, certain critics have chosen to treat *FR* and *SE* as one book. This choice only emphasises the lack of closure offered by *FR*. Cooper writes that ‘[Michael] Gorra reads both [novels] as one, and can do so because the second is a seamless continuation of the first’ (1998: 110). It is interesting to note that Okri himself rejects such an interpretation. In an interview with Delia Falconer he states, ‘People speak of [*SE*] as a continuation and that’s just laziness’ (1997: 46). Okri’s objection notwithstanding, there are too many similarities between *FR* and *SE* to discount the interpretation that the latter is a continuation of the former. Chapter Two of *SE* begins with the words, ‘Yes, the spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer, into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead’ (4), directly echoing the Azaro’s words on page 487 of *FR*. This beginning plunges the reader straight back into the story with no recapitulation of what happened before or any indication that a wholly new adventure has begun; it is, indeed, a ‘seamless continuation’. Okri employs a conversational tone and an assumption that the reader is familiar with everything that happened in *FR*. As with *FR*, *SE* is full of repetition and an Azaro who never seems to build upon his discoveries. Gorra says about *SE* that

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2 This is in contrast to *NS*, in which a speech by Zahra’s father (pp. 23-9) summarises the events of *ES*. Though the speech is directed at Zahra rather than either an audience within the text or readers of it, it is a convenient device to help situate any readers unfamiliar with the events of *ES*. *SE* makes no such concessions.
The political thugs still terrorize the neighborhood in which Azaro lives with his parents. The sinister and otherworldly Mme Koto still runs her palm-wine bar in league with the Party of the Rich. The great pre-election rally that was in the offing for the last half of the previous book still hasn't happened by the end of *Songs of Enchantment*. So when after 600 pages spread between the two volumes Azaro sees 'the sight which was to bring terror into our lives,' I almost shut the book for good. Terror hadn't been there before? But maybe Azaro needs to remind us, for these characters are so perpetually on the verge of crisis that the reader stops believing in it. Or stops believing, rather, that the crisis will ever be in any way resolved. (1993: 24)

Gorra's desire for some kind of resolution is similar to Azaro's 'hunger for a destination' mentioned earlier. But while Azaro works through his hunger, *FR* and certainly *SE* seem to leave Gorra travelling the 'famished road' of the kind Dad describes when he tells Mum that a story is not a car, but a road. The end of *SE* would be of no comfort to him, closing as it does with a typically speculative and indecisive statement by Azaro that 'Maybe one day we will see that beyond our chaos there could always be a new sunlight, and serenity' (297). And, in fact, the third novel in the cycle, *Infinite Riches*, ends, not with prose, but with a poem that further denies traditional narrative closure relating to concrete events, but also provides hope:

We go on living as if history is a dream.  
The miracle is that we go on  
Living and loving as best we can,  
In this enigma of reality. (338)

This last stanza returns to the motif of the enigma emphasising that life is a paradox.

In addition to the ambiguous endings that do not give the reader a sense of closure to the events in the texts, the novels also challenge the notion of absolute truth. The texts refuse to give the reader certainty of one, true, definitive account of the story told by one reliable narrator at a fixed point in time. For example, *ES* does not provide either the listeners within it or its reader with one authoritative narrator, or indeed, one authoritative version of the story. The novel challenges the reader because it is a kind of enactment of Azaro's hypothesis at the end of *FR* that 'no truth is ever final'. Not only does the reader of *ES* begin to wonder about the order and veracity of the events of the story, she must also very carefully consider the multiple sources of these stories, which are not always clearly or consistently identified. Shona Elizabeth Simpson analyses this in her article, 'One Face Less: Masks, Time, and the Telling of Stories in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*. She writes,
Through the open-endedness of all the stories, the voices and narratives gradually accrue until the reader becomes [sic] to wonder about the identity of the storytellers themselves: they may or may not be the same person, who may or may not be the person whose story they tell. (1994: 325-6)

This uncertainty is not alleviated by the various forms of 'proof' of identity or authority over the story proffered at several points in the texts. Various storytellers in ES have recourse to written documents in order to make their story more convincing. Zahra's journal and letters to and from the unseen correspondent appear at crucial moments in order to convince the audience who are listening to the story. However, the documents furnished as evidence do not succeed in making the story transparent. Indeed, even the storyteller who uses such records says, J'aime ce vent qui nous enveloppe et nous retire le sommeil des yeux. Il dérange l'ordre du texte' (107). The storyteller's celebration of the disruption of the order of the text suggests that it is possible to be liberated by rejecting an apparently rigid, linear approach to life or narrative. This is further emphasised by the ambiguous 'truth' of the story, indeed of any kind of writing; as Simpson says:

The 'truth' of any kind of writing has been called into question. With the confusion of the storytellers' identities, their individual authority cannot be trusted [...] The authority of any one voice is destroyed by the presence of so many conflicting claims to 'the truth', so the 'true' version of Ahmed's death and life cannot be established. The story of Ahmed has become many stories; concomitantly, Ahmed as a character disappears as his or her self becomes increasingly fractured. (1994: 328-9)

This lucid assessment of ES highlights the ways in which Zahra's liminality is reflected in the narrative techniques used to convey it. Zahra becomes more and more 'betwixt and between' as the novel goes on and she rejects her father's Law. Thus, the way the story is presented mirrors the state of its main character, leaving the reader without clear direction toward the interpretation of the texts.

NS is more subtle in its challenge of the truth, as there is apparently only one narrator, Zahra. It is undeniably significant that Zahra tries to seize her story back from the public in NS, by seeming to tell 'what really happened'. She notes, 'Mais comme ma vie n'est pas un conte, j'ai tenu à rétablir les faits et à vous livrer le secret gardé sous une pierre noire dans une maison aux murs hauts au fond d'une ruelle fermée par sept portes' (6-7). Zahra responds to the desire of her reader's by giving the 'facts', but she leaves the true meaning of the story, its secret, its enigma, 'sous une pierre noire', buried just as the mystery of Azaro's beginnings is buried. The impossibility of reaching this protected truth is celebrated in the preface to the novel, in which the narrator says to the audience, 'Amis du Bien! Ce que je vais vous confier ressemble à la vérité' (6, my italics). It is as if the narrator recognises that no story can be 'the whole truth and nothing
but the truth’ because the truth is impossible to tell in a linear and ordered fashion; the implications of the necessity to look beyond the linear to reach truth will be further explored in the final section of this chapter.

Though there is only one narrator in FR and SE, the reader is not given any clearer guidance to the interpretation of the texts. The principal element affecting this is that though Azaro tells his story in the past tense, he does not recount events in a clear cause and effect manner which a retrospective account usually allows and invites. Instead, there is some confusion created in FR and SE. Quayson notes that

The form of The Famished Road is radically determined by locating the narration in Azaro’s consciousness. This leads to a peculiar contradiction related to the point in the life of Azaro when he experiences events and the later time in the narrative when he tells us the story. We are not told at which precise point in time Azaro decides to narrate his childhood, and though the narrative resides firmly in the consciousness of a child, the first intimations of a maturer sensibility are to be glimpsed in the observable contradictions between the ‘T’ of the narrating instance and the ‘T’ of narrated events.

(1997: 124-5)

Throughout FR and SE there is an interplay between Azaro’s seeming inability to make connection between events, such as the two experiences with ‘a’ female midget, and his awareness that, for example, ‘in between my coming and going the great cycles of time had finally tightened around my neck’ (FR 6). This is an example of the ‘observable contradictions’ in the texts, and they are never resolved.

The two final elements that challenge the reader and place her within the riddle are the interrelated thematic aspects of orality and dream. The critic, particularly one from the West, must be careful in ascribing too much of a postcolonial author’s style to orality, as such attribution can become reductive and patronising. It is, however, also important to recognise that oral storytelling has remained an important cultural force in both Morocco and Nigeria. Robert Elbaz argues in his book, Tahar Ben jelloun ou L’inassouvissement du désir narratif, that there is a

relation essentielle entre l’oralité et l’écriture qui gère toute la production littéraire du Maghreb. Il me semble que toute théorie du Texte maghrébin se doit de prendre en considération cette relation fondamentale, à défaut de quoi l’interprétation textuelle et sa signification se réduiraient aux méthodologies occidentales qui sont loin de tenir compte de cette nature hybride du texte maghrébin. (1996: 10)

The connection between orality and writing is also present in Okri’s texts, as explored by critics such as Ato Quayson, who devotes two chapters of his book on the subject to Okri. The four novels may be read as a dialogue between the oral and the literary, exposing tension and
surprising similarities between the two. The assumed difference, as Maggi Phillips points out, between oral and written narrative is that the former is often supposedly non-linear, whilst the latter is conventionally bound to the linear. Walter Ong suggests this distinction in his book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technology of the Word*, which provides an understanding of the perceived difference between oral and literary narrative styles important to any understanding of the interplay of orality and literacy in Ben Jelloun's and Okri's texts. Ong suggests that

print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion.

 [...] The printed text is supposed to represent the words of an author in definitive or 'final' form. For print is comfortable only with finality. (1982: 132)

This distinguishing characteristic of print helps to inform discussion of how Ben Jelloun and Okri subvert the conventions and constrictions of the printed word. The word 'subvert' is vital because, though Ong rightly argues that 'it hardly does justice to oral composition to describe it as varying from an organisation it does not know and cannot conceive of' (1982: 143), Ben Jelloun and Okri plainly can conceive of such organisation, as they are writing rather than speaking their stories. Indeed, the prose of each is highly sophisticated and literary. And, as Maggi Phillips indicates, non-linear strategies may be read as resistance to the imposed linearity of European narrative:

While I am not convinced that novels and oral storytelling are distinguishable from one another by [the linearity of the former and non-linearity of the latter], general perception deems it to be so. Consequently, non-European novelists who are conscious of creating in a genre considered to be the prerogative of the former colonial masters, are apt to seek alternative structures which suggest, if not achieve, linear transgression. (1997: 167)

It is possible to see in the lack of closure and the non-linear trajectory of the narratives in the four novels the influence of orality, and to read this, in turn, as an expression of resistance to residual colonial influence. The recurrence of riddles in the texts is one of the ways in which the texts may be seen to use oral structures for a literary and political purpose. Ong argues that orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat: utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or contradictory one. (1982: 44)

Though the reader of a printed text cannot 'top' the riddles in the texts directly, intellectual struggle is present in the texts, particularly *FR*, as the riddles and paradoxes challenge the reader
to make something of them. For example, Jacqueline Bardolph observes in FR a ‘lack of tension’ that may also be seen in SE, she notes that FR ‘seems static, repetitive, shapeless in its last chapters. Is is [sic] not only due to an evolution in the storyline, but to an apparent lack of inspiration, a loss of narrative intensity and sense of direction’ (1992: 48). And yet, it is in FR’s final chapters that the riddles of the text are most clearly presented, and the most important questions posed, but never answered. Ong’s assertion about conventional narrative helps further to contextualise this observation. He observes,

You do not find climactic linear plots ready-formed in people’s lives, although real lives may provide material out of which such a plot may be constructed by ruthless elimination of all but a few carefully highlighted incidents. The full story of all the events in Othello’s whole life would be a complete bore. (1982: 143)

The events recounted in FR and SE also do not seem to have been subjected to ‘ruthless elimination’, as it is very difficult to see how one event connects to another. Okri takes the risk that the reader will find FR and SE to be a complete bore. It is undoubtedly true that the reading experience of FR and SE may not be particularly satisfying to the reader who ceases to be captivated by Okri’s efflorescent prose and become merely (and perhaps severely) irritated by it. Critics such as Gorra probably have the same hope expressed in ES by one of the storytellers for ‘une main qui passerait sur les page d’un ouvrage dela ecrit et qui ferait le propre a l’interieur, effaçant l’inutile et le pompeux, le creux et le superflu!’ (108). Okri’s abundance of detail leaves things in the texts that may well be superfluous, but it is difficult for the reader to know how to assess them as such, with the effect that she may feel disorientated or overloaded. Dreams and dream-like elements to the texts may also lead to feelings of disorientation.

Chapter III discussed specific ‘magical realist’ elements to demonstrate the importance of a belief in worlds and realities beyond what is normally considered to be tangible and real. It is also possible to interpret these elements as part of the ‘riddle’ that places the reader in a liminal position within the texts. For example, ES and NS are full of events of which Zahra herself doubts the veracity. The visit to the children’s village, for example, which may be read as a site of rebirth for her, is certainly not presented as ‘realistic’. Zahra is ‘enlevée comme dans les contes anciens’ (NS 50), suggesting that the event is as much fiction as it is reality. The two dream sequences in NS discussed in Chapter II also confuse the reader’s understanding of the text: if an event that seems significant in terms of Zahra’s development did not ‘really’ happen, does that mean she has not developed? What is the meaning of the presence of so many events the ‘reality’ of which is never confirmed? And yet, Chapter III showed that both Zahra’s and Azaro’s ‘visions’ give insight into a hidden, often political, truth. The magical realist elements in both sets of texts therefore demand that the reader pays extremely close attention. Quayson
gives a compelling explication of this process in his discussion of ‘animist realism’ in FR, in which he notes that

*every* narrative detail has potential symbolic value. Since such an animist generalization suggests that any item is capable of manifesting an intrinsic ‘spiritual’ potential at any given time, the implication is that a reader requires a much greater alertness to the potential symbolic value of all narrative elements. This can easily lead to reader fatigue, particularly in the context of long novels that eschew explicit teleological patterning. In a way, it enforces a regime of constant reader participation in constructing the meanings of the text while at the same time ensuring that the reader cannot completely enter the process of creation because there are not enough cues for predicting the precise moment of the articulation of the spiritual behind things. (1997: 149)

Gorra and others clearly experience this reader fatigue. Some readers find this liminality to be liberating; others find it merely annoying. Okri’s own text could used to describe its greatest faults—or virtues, again through the image of the road. The roads in Azaro’s neighbourhood are as contradictory and purposeless as FR and SE may sometimes seem to the hapless reader:

The roads seemed to me then to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves, turning in on themselves, like snakes, tails in their mouths, twisting themselves into labyrinths. The road was the worst hallucination of them all, leading towards home and then away from it, without end, with too many signs and no directions. The road became my torment, my aimless pilgrimage, and I found myself merely walking to discover where all the roads lead to, where they end. (114-5)

Thus, the reader’s journey through the texts may also seem an ‘aimless pilgrimage’ and she may not bother to read to the end. And, if the road is really a river, as the text suggests several times, it does not have an end. The reader must, to pass the time or avoid boredom, like Zahra take the threads of the story and make something meaningful out of them. Paradoxically, this ability may leave the reader with a ‘feeling of powerlessness’ (Elsbree 1991: 152). Though Azaro may come to enjoy getting lost, a reader may feel frustrated after reading FR and SE. A dream may be the ‘highest point of a life’, but there are different kinds of dreams: fantasies that one constructs consciously, which are more likely to resemble conventional linear narrative; and dreams over which one has no control, full of illogical or extraneous material. The reader may experience the texts as both. Therefore, if the texts refuse closure, reject the notion of one absolute truth, and overflow with elements from oral narrative and dream, does this make them more ‘postmodern’ than ‘postcolonial’, as the Introduction noted that some critics have suggested? In other words,
given these factors that challenge one conclusive interpretation of the texts, what may be said about their political message within the postcolonial context?

III. THE POSTMODERN/POSTCOLONIAL DEBATE

As suggested in Chapter III and throughout this Conclusion, the texts defy straightforward interpretation of their political aims. Even the allegory between protagonist and nation invited in FR and ES is problematic and not fully developed in the texts, suggesting that these readings, too, are just one possible story, one possible interpretation of the texts. Both at the time of transition between colonial rule and political Independence and at the time that Ben Jelloun and Okri wrote their texts, there was little stability or clear indication of where Morocco and Nigeria were headed. Independence in Morocco was, with the ascension of Hassan II to the throne in 1961, not characterised by freedom of expression. The first constitution ‘solidified the king’s power at the expense of the theoretically representative and elected legislative branch’ (Tessler, Entelis and White 1995: 372). As a result of the invocation of the King’s ‘emergency powers’, between 1965 and 1970 ‘political activity in Morocco virtually disappeared’ (373), and freedom of the press was also significantly curtailed. The situation in 1985 and 1987, when ES and NS were respectively published, was part of a ‘cycle of unrest motivated by economic privation followed by harsh security measures’ (Tessler, Entelis and White 1995: 378), calling into question Morocco’s human rights record. Though ES and NS refer to conflict between nationalists and colonial authorities, Fatouma’s story in ES suggests a criticism of the post-Independence regime. She says of a riot opposing the then authorities and the people that ‘Le principe était de nettoyer le pays de la mauvaise grains pour empêcher de nouvelles émeutes. Hélas! le pays ne fut pas vraiment nettoyé..., d’autres émeutes, plus sanglantes, eurent lieu quinze et vingt ans après...’ (170). The riots to which she refers may be those of 1984, just one year before the publication of ES.

The situation in Nigeria in the early 1990s was even more complex than that of Morocco. In 1991, when FR was published, Ibrahim Babangida was the military ruler of Nigeria and had been since 1985. Though claiming to be in power only until democratic election of officials could take place, Babangida nevertheless prevaricated and postponed such elections until 1993. When Babangida lost to Moshood Abiola in 1993, the election results were declared invalid. After a short-lived (83-day) ‘term’ by the civilian leader picked by Babangida (Ernest Shonekan), Sani Abacha seized power and began one of the most notoriously corrupt political regimes in the world. It is speculated that Abacha embezzled millions, if not billions, of dollars from Nigeria’s economy, sending most of it through London.

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3 All facts and figures about Nigeria’s political history are taken from Hauss 2000. Pages 24-5 deal specifically with the situation under Babangida.
4 Recent BBC Radio 4 news broadcasts, including one on the evening of 22 January 2001 have discussed the extent of Abacha’s corruption.
It may be seen from this analysis that the instability of Zahra's and Azaro's identities does reflect the instability of the political situation in the texts; ultimately, however, Zahra's and Azaro's stories are more positive about instability. Instead of using allegory, as Uprety suggests some authors might, to 'seek imaginary wholeness' in which 'nation becomes that imagined space where the fractured and alienated third-world subject finds a wholeness of form with which he can identify' (1997: 379), the presentation of a fractured but also liberated third-world subject provides hope for the nation. The potential hope offered by Zahra's and Azaro's liminal identities lies in their ability to find freedom in liberation, despite harsh realities.

There is also another level on which to assess the political message of the texts, and this is through style. Critical response to Ben Jelloun's narrative technique has lauded his style, and attributed it to active engagement with the legacy of colonialism. Robert Elbaz's analysis of Ben Jelloun's texts is very useful in the ways it relates narrative technique to political reality. He writes that

chez Ben Jelloun, cette impuissance à relater le récit jusqu’au bout prend des formes de transgressions variées; la séquence narrative est toujours transgressée et le récit suspendu en plein milieu. Les manifestations de cette suspension sont plurielles: points de suspension, récit qui est versé dans un autre, cassure de la pagination, ou recours incessant à la fragmentation, insertion d’éléments extra-textuels, tel que la langue arabe dans sa calligraphie variée, etc., qui sont là pour déranger la quiétude linéaire du récit. (1996: 9)

Thus, not only is it possible to read Ben Jelloun’s narrative technique as being shaped by orality, but also there are important symbolic and political implications in these techniques. Elbaz relates these strategies specifically to the postcolonial arena. He describes the obsession of the Maghrebi novel with 'la chute coloniale et son prolongement dans l’Histoire' (1996: 7).

John Erickson’s article, ‘Writing Double: Politics and the African Narrative of French Expression’, takes this idea further by suggesting that Ben Jelloun ‘counters the system of traditional narrative by rejecting the reductive ideology that underlies it’ (1991: 112). Indeed, the text also counters the system of traditional identity by portraying a woman who rejects biology and social role and forms her own identity. Erickson also asserts that

5It is interesting to note that, for both Nigeria and Morocco, what is seen as a 'new era' of politics began in 1999. On 29 May 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo was inaugurated as the first democratically-elected president in decades, and one who has pledged to 'clean up' the country. In Morocco, Hassan II died in 1999, and his son, Mohammed VI ascended the throne, with promises of more openness, which he has begun to fulfil by releasing approximately 8,000 political prisoners held under his father and committing himself to bettering the situation of women in his country, through education and changes in the divorce law (Henley 2000: 1). The 'honeymoon' period for Obasanjo seems to be ending, however. Adekeye Adebajo observes that his regime 'has drifted uneasily between anarchy and tyranny' (2001: 28). As for Mohammed VI, though he remains popular, some of his reforms have met 'potentially catastrophic opposition from traditional Muslims' (Henley 2000: 1).
It is again by the reversible inside-outside manoeuvres derived from this breaking down of narrative levels that ben Jelloun [sic] literally and literarily turns inside out the traditional Western narrative and, by extension, the relationship between the West and the non-West. For by the device of reversibility, hierarchies of value, value systems legitimated by totalizing metanarrative, reveal their character in all its naked arbitrariness. (1991: 117-8).

It is through this strategy of reversal, which includes refusing to give a definitive meaning to the text, that Ben Jelloun’s texts contain a potentially significant strategy of political resistance but also remain enigmatic.

Okri’s style may be seen to achieve similar inversions of traditional Western narrative structure, yet critics such as Cooper do not read this inversion as a political strategy. She argues, instead, that FR is ‘flawed [...] by the ambivalence, contradictions and discordances of its music, and scarred by its refusal to move beyond individualized solutions for the nation state and to embrace change wholeheartedly’ (1998: 114). However, in the light of the preceding analysis in this thesis, it is possible to reach the conclusion that Okri is more faithful to the political reality of Nigeria by showing ‘ambivalence, contradictions and discordances’. And, as with ES and NS, the very opacity of FR and SE is a form of resistance against any kind of colonisation, by Western or postcolonial reader. The conscious use of opaque writing by both authors may be interpreted as a strategy of resistance. Celia Britton identifies this theoretical concept in Édouard Glissant’s writing. She explains his belief that ‘Respect for the Other includes respect for the “opacity” of the Other’s difference, which resists one’s attempts to assimilate it or objectify it’ (1999: 18). She observes that ‘opacity is also a defense against understanding, at least in the hierarchical, objectifying way in which this usually operates between the West and the Third World’ (19). In the case of the four novels under discussion here, it is possible to read them also as deliberately opaque ones that defy the reader’s attempts to understand, and thereby objectify, them.

If the opacity of the texts is read as a strategy of resistance, then it seems that they are rightly placed in the category of ‘postcolonial’ texts, acknowledging as they do the ‘unevenness’ of power differences, rather than in that of ‘postmodern’ ones, which some postcolonial critics use as a term of abuse to refer to texts that do not take political matters seriously enough, or that ignore political and historical realities. However, in my view, any classification must be challenged if the texts are to be deemed as being truly opaque. The opacity of these texts demand that the reader move beyond categorisation and objectification, which may lead to appropriation of the texts to advance a particular ideology. To respect the opacity of the texts is not to refrain from attributing any meaning to them, but to respect that they will always elude any barriers, categories or meanings that it may be helpful to use in relation to them. Indeed, Okri himself rejects the categorisation of his work as postcolonial, saying that such classifications
are very poor descriptions of the work that some of us are trying to do. Because it completely situates the work within a time/historical context and not within a context of self and inner necessity, which is bigger than that and beyond that. (Falconer 1997: 44)

The opacity of the texts is their testimony to the truth in all its facets, without reducing it to conventional linear narrative and its false sense of closure. As Ben Jelloun asserts,

*Le réalisme n’existe pas. Ceux qui prétendent le saisir se font des illusions et trompent leurs lecteurs. Le réel, surtout quand il surgit des terres blessées de l’Amérique du Sud ou du Maghreb, ne peut qu’être fou et imprévisible, la réalité n’est jamais ce que nous voyons. La réalité n’existe que parce qu’elle exagère. Elle se moque de tous et nous berce d’illusions […] C’est en trahissant ce qui apparaît, c’est en tordant le cou à l’évidence que des créateurs ont pu non seulement comprendre et nous faire comprendre une parcelle du réel. (1992: 3)*

Ben Jelloun’s response to the chaos he has seen is to engage with it by portraying it honestly rather than to ignore it by presenting a cohesive and coherent reality.

Thus, the political allegory of the texts has been shown to be only partially satisfactory, as is the classification of Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s work as postcolonial rather than postmodern. What now may be done, as a culmination of all the analysis undertaken in this thesis, is to state that, in fact, the most interesting ‘allegory’ in the texts is not between ‘hero’ and nation, but rather between liminal protagonist and artist, Azaro and Okri, Zahra and Ben Jelloun. Salman Rushdie’s assessment of his own identity and that of Third World or postcolonial artist is particularly apt in the present discussion of Okri’s and Ben Jelloun’s connection to their ‘heroes’:

*Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. (Quoted in Cooper 1998: 21)*

Okri and Ben Jelloun inhabit this shifting, liminal territory and find in it the creativity of the potential space, which allows them to engage imaginatively with the world. The nature of Azaro’s liminal identity is the most useful for drawing a parallel between the liminar and the artist, because of the clearly-stated benefits he receives from his connection with the spirit world, as examined in Chapter III. His liminality gives him access to a world of beautiful dreams and visions, which he can then put to use in the human world. The ‘dream that can be the highest point of a life’ in FR is not left only as a dream, for it returns in SE, and Azaro amplifies its message: ‘A dream can be the highest point of a life; action can be its purest manifestation’ (275). Thus, it is the access to the world of dreams that allows the liminar to act, rather than, as
assumed of postmodern writing, prevents him from acting. Ben Jelloun, for his part, explicitly states, ‘j'écris pour agir’ (Argand 1999: 31). But this action does not take the form of a direct representation of reality or a clear plan of action of which the political authorities should take note. Rather, the action taken by Ben Jelloun and Okri is to share their visions, just as Azaro shares his when he saves the ghetto-dwellers from the poisoned milk. Their visions speak of transformation, its benefits, and its drawbacks, and call the reader to enter the struggle to make meaning out of the riddle, to celebrate the paradox and respect the opacity of the Other. In this way, Okri and Ben Jelloun demonstrate in the four novels the ‘gut conviction that art can change consciousness and extend understanding’, a hope that ‘has been one of the permanent mainstays of serious writers since the Enlightenment and cuts across lines of genre and culture’ (Elsbree 1991: 36). The social and political contexts of the events within the texts are undeniably important, and Ben Jelloun’s and Okri’s position between the West and their nations of origin, clearly informs their texts. However, the ultimate message is more unifying than divisive. The reader is called to create and celebrate an identity based on multiple, paradoxical, and ever-shifting realities.
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1This chapter was excluded from the third edition of Hauss' book, Comparative Politics: Domestic Responses to Global Challenges. Third Edition. (Belmont, CA and London: Watsworth/Thompson Learning, 2000), so it was published on the web instead.
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