

**Literary Construction of Subaltern Childhoods in Urban Tanzania:
Vulnerability and Survival in Mbogo's *Watoto wa Maman'tilie***

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction of subaltern childhoods in Emmanuel Mbogo's *Watoto wa Maman'tilie*, focusing on marginalized children's vulnerability and resilience within the oppressive social structures of urban Tanzania. Drawing on Subaltern Theory (Gramsci, 1971; Spivak, 1988), the study examines how children are represented as marginalised subjects whose lives are shaped by poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to protection and resources. A qualitative textual design was employed, using close reading and thematic analysis of the novel. The findings reveal that subaltern childhoods are constructed through poverty, family instability, parental neglect, and social inequality, exposing children to multiple forms of vulnerability. Simultaneously, the novel portrays children as active agents who develop diverse survival strategies, including informal labour, social networking, and resilience in negotiating everyday hardships. Nevertheless, their agency remains constrained by dominant social and economic structures that restrict their opportunities and silence their voices. The study concludes that the novel presents subaltern childhood as a complex condition marked by the coexistence of vulnerability and survival. By foregrounding children's lived experiences, the study contributes to scholarship on subaltern childhoods, marginalisation, and inequality while enhancing understanding of how African literature represents vulnerable children's agency and survival strategies.

Key concepts: *Literary construction, subaltern childhoods, vulnerability, survival, urban Tanzania*

Introduction

Literature serves as a powerful medium for representing human experiences and interrogating social realities. Through its imaginative engagement with society, it illuminates the lives of marginalized individuals and gives voice to those often excluded from dominant narratives. Among contemporary literary forms, urban fiction has gained prominence for its exploration of the social, economic, and cultural transformations associated with rapid urbanization. Lehan (1998) argues that the city is not merely a backdrop for human action but a dynamic force that shapes identities, relationships, and lived experiences. Likewise, Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) describe the metropolis as a space of both opportunity and precarity, while Simone (2004, 2010) highlights the everyday practices through which urban residents navigate uncertainty and exclusion. Quayson (2014) further observes that urban narratives reveal the complex intersections of poverty, inequality, mobility, and resilience that characterize contemporary city life. Situated within this literary tradition, Emmanuel Mbogo's *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* offers a nuanced portrayal of urban Tanzania and the experiences of children living on the margins of society.

Childhood has increasingly become a significant subject of literary and scholarly inquiry, reflecting a shift from viewing it as a universal and fixed stage of human development to understanding it as a socially and historically situated experience. As James and Prout (1997) argue, childhood is shaped by the cultural, social, and economic conditions within which children live. Literary representations of childhood therefore reveal

not only the personal experiences of children but also the broader structures of power, inequality, and exclusion that shape their lives. In urban settings marked by deep socioeconomic disparities, children often encounter poverty, fragile family relationships, inadequate social support, and restricted opportunities for advancement (UNICEF, 2024; World Bank, 2022). Such realities challenge idealized notions of childhood as a period of innocence, security, and dependency, instead presenting it as a complex and contested space where vulnerability, resilience, and survival intersect. Thus, literary explorations of childhood provide valuable insights into the ways children experience and negotiate the social realities that define their everyday lives.

The concept of subalternity offers a valuable framework for analysing these experiences. Originally developed by Gramsci (1971) and later expanded by Spivak (1988), subalternity refers to the condition of groups whose voices and experiences are marginalized within dominant systems of power and representation. Applied to childhood, the concept illuminates how structural inequalities can limit children's visibility, participation, and access to opportunities, positioning them at the margins of social and institutional life. Scholars such as Gubar (2013) and Honeyman (2005) argue that literary representations of childhood often expose the "kinship" between the child and other marginalized groups, highlighting how adults institutionalize and silence the child's voice. Furthermore, in the context of postcolonial and African literary traditions, scholars such as Coundouriotis (2015) and Rudd (2013) observe that the representation of the suffering or precarious child serves as a powerful trope for critiquing state failure, economic dispossession, and historical trauma. By placing Subaltern Theory in conversation with these literary critiques, it becomes possible to

trace how the novel moves beyond treating the child as a passive symbol of suffering and instead positions them as an active, albeit constrained, agent negotiating systemic oppression.

Urban fiction offers a particularly valuable site for examining such forms of marginalization because it frequently foregrounds the lives of those positioned at the periphery of social and economic systems. Through its engagement with poverty, social exclusion, and everyday survival, the genre reveals both the constraints imposed by unequal social structures and the strategies individuals develop to navigate them. *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* exemplifies this concern through its depiction of children growing up amid economic hardship and fragile caregiving arrangements. The novel portrays their encounters with poverty, parental neglect, and social uncertainty while simultaneously highlighting their resilience and capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances. This paper, therefore, examines the literary construction of subaltern childhoods in *Watoto wa Maman'tilie*, focusing on how the novel represents children's vulnerability and survival within the socioeconomic realities of urban Tanzania.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Subaltern Theory in examining the literary construction of subaltern childhoods in Emmanuel Mbogo's *Watoto wa Maman'tilie*. Originally associated with the work of Gramsci (1971) and later developed by Spivak (1988), Subaltern Theory focuses on groups that occupy marginalized positions within dominant social, political, and economic structures. The theory is concerned with how power relations shape the experiences, visibility, and representation of individuals whose voices are often excluded from dominant systems of knowledge, authority,

and social recognition. As a critical framework, it provides valuable insights into the ways literary texts represent marginalized subjects and the structural conditions that shape their lives.

A central contribution of Subaltern Theory is its emphasis on the relationship between power and representation. Spivak's (1988) influential question, "*Can the subaltern speak?*", draws attention to the difficulties marginalized groups face in expressing their experiences within systems that frequently silence, overlook, or misrepresent them. Although the concept initially emerged in discussions of class and colonial domination, it has since been extended to other marginalized groups, including children, whose experiences are often mediated through adult-centred institutions and social hierarchies. From this perspective, children may be understood as subaltern subjects when their voices, interests, and lived realities are constrained by social, economic, and institutional inequalities that limit their participation, visibility, and access to resources.

In literary studies, Subaltern Theory provides a useful framework for examining how narratives construct and represent experiences of exclusion, powerlessness, resistance, and agency. Rather than viewing literary characters merely as reflections of social realities, the theory encourages an analysis of the ways texts make visible the experiences of groups that are frequently pushed to the margins of society. It therefore facilitates an examination of how literary representations expose unequal power relations while simultaneously revealing the strategies through which marginalized individuals negotiate their circumstances. Applied to this study, the theory enables an analysis of how *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* represents children as subaltern subjects whose lives are shaped by poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to protection and resources, while also highlighting the ways

they navigate vulnerability and struggle for survival within the urban environment.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative textual analysis to examine the literary construction of subaltern childhoods in Emmanuel Mbogo's *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* (2021). The novel was purposively selected because its portrayal of children living on the margins of urban society provides a rich literary context for exploring the interconnected themes of vulnerability and survival.

The analysis was guided by close reading, focusing on characterization, narrative events, dialogue, and descriptive passages through which the novel constructs children's experiences. Relevant textual evidence was identified, translated where necessary, and interpreted in relation to the representation of marginalisation, vulnerability, social exclusion, family instability, and survival. Particular attention was paid to the literary strategies through which children are portrayed as subaltern subjects, including the ways their experiences, voices, relationships, and everyday struggles are represented within the narrative.

Drawing on Subaltern Theory, the analysis examined how the novel constructs childhood as a site of both vulnerability and agency, revealing the structural inequalities that shape children's lives while highlighting their efforts to negotiate and survive adverse urban conditions. The focus was therefore not only on what the novel says about marginalized children but also on how literary representation produces meanings about childhood, exclusion, and survival in the urban Tanzanian context.

To support the interpretation, relevant scholarship on Subaltern Theory, childhood studies, urban fiction, and African literary criticism was consulted. As a qualitative textual analysis of a literary work, the study did not involve human participants.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented and discussed based on the purposively selected novel as highlighted in the methodology. Guided by Subaltern Theory, the discussion examines the literary construction of subaltern childhoods in Emmanuel Mbogo's *Watoto wa Maman'tilie*. The analysis focuses on how the novel represents children's experiences of vulnerability and survival within the socioeconomic realities of urban Tanzania, with particular attention to poverty, family instability, and social exclusion.

Marginalisation and the production of subaltern childhoods

In *Watoto wa Maman'tilie*, subaltern childhood is constructed through intersecting structures of poverty, institutional exclusion, and urban inequality. Rather than treating childhood as a universal or protected developmental stage, the novel presents it as a socially produced condition shaped by unequal access to education, resources, and urban opportunity. This aligns with childhood studies perspectives that reject universalised notions of childhood and instead emphasize its production through historically and socially specific inequalities (Spyros Spyrou, Rachel Rosen & Daniel Cook, 2018; Boyden et al., 2019). Within this framework, Zita and Peter emerge as subaltern subjects whose childhoods are constituted by structural deprivation that limits their access to essential social institutions.

Building on this, their positioning can also be read through Spivak's (1988) concept of subalternity, which further sharpens the analysis by highlighting how structural inequality produces not only material deprivation but also exclusion from systems of recognition. From this perspective, Zita and Peter occupy positions outside structures of recognition, access, and institutional non-recognition of their lived realities. This means that their experiences are not fully translated into forms that are acknowledged or acted upon within formal institutions, thereby reinforcing their marginal status within the social order.

From a childhood studies perspective, this demonstrates what Laura Camfield (2023) describes as the multidimensional nature of child poverty, where deprivation is not only economic but also institutional, affecting children's access to essential services that shape life trajectories. In this sense, exclusion from schooling is not an isolated event but part of a broader structural process that limits children's future capabilities. UNICEF (2024) similarly emphasises that educational exclusion reproduces long-term inequality by restricting children's participation in key social institutions. The novel thus illustrates how poverty operates as a structural mechanism that regulates access to education and thereby produces differentiated childhoods.

This structural exclusion is further normalised through everyday expressions of scarcity, captured in the lament "*Lakini ada? Sare? Wapi!*" (p. 15) ("But school fees? Uniforms? Where would they come from?"). The rhetorical structure of this statement signals not temporary absence but the routinisation of deprivation. Scarcity becomes embedded in children's lived reality to the extent that lack is anticipated rather than questioned. In Spyrou

(2023) terms, such conditions shape children's social worlds by defining the limits within which agency and aspiration are formed.

Beyond institutional exclusion, the novel extends subaltern childhood into urban spatial arrangements, particularly through the depiction of survival economies. Peter's encounter with the dumpsite, "*Aliwaona watoto kwa wakubwa wamejizika kwenye miozo ya takataka wakichakurachakura, kubahatisha riziki zao*" (p. 21) ("He saw children and adults buried in heaps of garbage scavenging in search of their livelihoods"), reconfigures the city as a space of precarious survival rather than opportunity. Here, children are inserted into what Mbembe (2001) conceptualises as postcolonial urban precarity, where informal and hazardous labour becomes the primary mode of existence for marginalised populations. The convergence of children and adults in scavenging activities further demonstrates how structural inequality collapses generational boundaries under conditions of shared deprivation.

The moral and affective dimensions of poverty are captured in the statement "*Umaskini mbaya. Tena unatia haya*" (p. 18) ("Poverty is terrible. It is also shameful"). This articulation reveals poverty not only as material deprivation but also as a socially stigmatised condition that produces humiliation and social invisibility. In line with Boyden et al. (2019), poverty is therefore both economic and symbolic, shaping how children are positioned within society and how they come to perceive themselves.

Taken, these representations demonstrate that subaltern childhood in *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* is not an individual condition but a socially produced outcome of intersecting structural inequalities. Education, urban space, and everyday survival practices operate as interconnected sites through which

exclusion is reproduced. Within these conditions, children such as Zita and Peter occupy structurally marginal positions that define their access to opportunity, recognition, and social mobility. The novel thus constructs childhood as a deeply stratified social experience, where vulnerability is not accidental but systematically produced through the organisation of urban life.

Family instability and the reproduction of child vulnerability

While poverty provides the wider structural foundation of marginalisation in *Watoto wa Maman'tilie*, its most immediate and lived effects are mediated through family relations and everyday caregiving systems. A close reading of the novel reveals that deprivation is not merely an abstract socioeconomic condition but is produced and reproduced within unstable household structures. Child vulnerability therefore emerges at the intersection of structural inequality and domestic fragility, where weakened family systems become the primary site through which poverty is experienced, negotiated, and intensified. Consequently, children are exposed to multiple forms of exclusion, including interrupted education, emotional insecurity, and diminished protection within the household.

From a Spivakian perspective, these children occupy a subaltern position in which their needs, experiences, and vulnerabilities remain insufficiently recognised within dominant social and institutional structures (Spivak, 1988). Their marginalisation is not simply a consequence of individual misfortune but results from structural conditions that deny them access to effective systems of support and representation. In the novel, this condition is materialised through the breakdown of caregiving structures, beginning with parental failure to provide educational support. The narrator observes:

“Baba yao, mzee Lomolomo, alikuwa hajawalipia ada wala kuwanunulia sare” (p. 1) [Their father, Mr. Lomolomo, had neither paid their school fees nor bought them school uniforms]. This representation demonstrates how economic hardship and parental neglect intersect to restrict children's educational opportunities and reinforce their marginal position. The children's vulnerability is therefore constructed not only through material deprivation but also through the failure of family structures to provide the resources necessary for social inclusion and development.

The fragility of the household is further intensified by caregiver illness, unemployment, and alcoholism, all of which undermine the family's protective function. These conditions expose children to insecurity while simultaneously compelling them to navigate circumstances beyond their control. Through such representations, Mbogo constructs family instability as a key mechanism through which subaltern childhoods are produced and sustained, revealing how broader structural inequalities become embedded in the everyday experiences of children.

Family instability is further intensified by Maman'tilie's illness, which weakens the household's primary caregiving capacity. The narrator states: *“Tangu jana homa kali ya malaria imemshika barabara”* (p. 14). (Since yesterday, a severe malaria fever had struck her badly). As the main caregiver, Maman'tilie's declining health disrupts the continuity of care within the household, exposing children to increased emotional and material insecurity. The novel therefore illustrates how illness within vulnerable households contributes to the reproduction of childhood precarity by limiting caregivers' ability to provide protection and stability.

The fragility of the household is further reinforced through Lomolomo's unemployment and alcoholism. The narrator describes his transformation after losing employment at the harbour: "*Huyu ndiye mzee Lomolomo, Lomolomo mpya ambaye kwake pombe ya mataputapu na gongo alivifanya dini, tangu alipopunguzwa kazi kule bandarini na kukosa kabisa kibarua kingine*" (p. 73). (This was the new Lomolomo, for whom cheap liquor and illicit alcohol had become a religion ever since he lost his job at the harbour and failed to find another one). Through this portrayal, Mbogo constructs alcoholism not simply as an individual weakness but as an outcome of economic displacement and social insecurity. Lomolomo's inability to fulfil his parental responsibilities transforms him from a figure of protection into a source of instability within the family.

The emotional consequences of this instability are evident in Peter's relationship with his father. The narrator states: "*Peter hakuinuka kumfungulia baba yake, aliogopa*" (p. 72). (Peter did not get up to open the door for his father because he was afraid). This moment reveals the psychological impact of domestic instability, as Peter experiences the family not as a secure environment but as a space of fear and uncertainty. The source of this insecurity is further emphasized through the narrator's description of Lomolomo's neglect: "*Kuna siku halali. Kuna siku hushinda njaa... Akiamka asubuhi anashika njia-huyoo! Kwenye maficho ya pombe haramu*" (p. 75). (Some days he sleeps hungry. Some days he spends the whole day without food. Alas! Lomolomo contributes nothing more. Every morning, he heads straight to the hideouts of illicit alcohol) Through these portrayals, Mbogo demonstrates how unemployment, alcoholism, and parental neglect weaken the family as a protective institution, intensifying children's vulnerability and shaping their experiences of marginalisation.

In addition, the narrative exposes the uneven distribution of caregiving responsibility within the household. The statement “*Mambo hayo muwe mnamweleza baba yenu. Si mimi*” (“You should tell those matters to your father, not me”) (p.6) signals fragmentation in parental authority and care. In line with Mama’s (2001) analysis of gendered care economies in African households, such fragmentation reflects structural pressures that disproportionately burden women while weakening collective family support systems.

Across the findings, Mbogo constructs family instability as a central mechanism in the production of subaltern childhoods. The convergence of poverty, illness, parental neglect, unemployment, and alcoholism undermines caregiving structures, exposing children to educational exclusion, emotional insecurity, and limited social protection. Rather than depicting vulnerability as an individual condition, the novel locates it within broader structural inequalities that are experienced most directly through the family. In this context, childhood emerges as a precarious social position shaped by inadequate care, restricted opportunities, and persistent uncertainty.

Educational exclusion and the entrenchment of social inequality

In *Watoto wa Maman’tilie*, educational exclusion operates as a central mechanism through which urban social inequality is reproduced and normalised. The novel demonstrates that access to schooling is not determined by ability or aspiration but is fundamentally structured by socioeconomic positioning and institutional arrangements that regulate inclusion. Within this framework, the experiences of Peter, Zita, and Musa illustrate how poverty interrupts educational trajectories and consolidates

subaltern childhoods marked by constrained mobility and limited institutional recognition.

The novel foregrounds this exclusion through the direct linkage between schooling and economic capacity, as captured in the exchange: “*Karibu mwezi sasa tangu tufukuzwe shule - Ada*” (“It has been almost a month since we were expelled - School fees”) (p.35). The reduction of explanation to a single term, *ada*, signifies the reduction of educational access to financial eligibility. This is further reinforced by the narrator’s confirmation: “*Wiki ya pili sasa tangu Zita na Peter wafukuzwe shule*” (“It was now the second week since Zita and Peter had been expelled from school”) (p.15). Taken together, these instances demonstrate how schooling is transformed from a public entitlement into a commodified privilege.

Reading through Spivak’s (1988) theorisation of the subaltern, these children can be understood as occupying a position of structural exclusion in which their lived realities fail to enter fully into the domain of institutional recognition. In this sense, “non-recognition” does not imply absence, but rather the inability of dominant social systems to translate their conditions into effective educational inclusion. Educational exclusion, therefore, functions not only as deprivation but also as a form of epistemic and institutional silencing that renders subaltern childhoods socially invisible within formal structures of education.

Beyond institutional exclusion, the novel highlights the affective and psychological consequences of disrupted schooling. Peter’s distress is captured in the observation: “*Jambo hili lilikuwa linamsumbua akili Peter*” (“This matter constantly troubled Peter’s mind”) (Mbogo, 2021, p.15). This reflects how educational deprivation produces anxiety, uncertainty, and a

destabilised sense of futurity. As Leon Tikly (2022) argues, exclusion from education is simultaneously structural and affective, shaping children's emotional landscapes and perceived life possibilities.

Despite exclusion, Peter's continued engagement with reading complicates deficit-based assumptions about marginalised children. His image, "*Peter alikaa nje, kaegemea ukuta, akisoma riwaya ya Adili na Nduguze*" ("Peter sat outside, leaning against the wall reading *Adili na Nduguze*") (p.34), signals sustained intellectual aspiration outside formal schooling. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this reveals a disjunction between embodied cultural aspiration and the unequal distribution of institutionalised cultural capital, whereby children possess educational desire but lack the economic conditions required for its realisation (Pierre Bourdieu, 1986; Diane Reay, 2023).

This tension between aspiration and structural constraint is further articulated in Peter's repeated declarations: "*Ila mimi lazima nirudi shule*" ("But I must return to school") and "*Nataka nipate pesa, nirudi shule*" ("I want to get money so that I can return to school") (pp. 19, 33). Education is thus constructed as both necessity and impossibility: a pathway to mobility that simultaneously requires resources already denied by poverty. As OECD (2024) and Reay (2023) note, educational aspiration alone cannot overcome structural inequalities that determine access to schooling and learning materials, thereby reproducing stratified educational outcomes.

The narrative further demonstrates how exclusion compels children into informal economic activity as a strategy for re-entry into schooling. Peter's engagement in petty trading, "*Katika biashara hii ndogo ya genge tayari kulionyesha dalili nzuri*" ("This small food stall business was already

showing promising signs”) (p.50), illustrates the fusion of survival and educational aspiration. This reflects UNICEF (2023) and ILO (2024), which document how economic precarity drives children into informal labour, creating cyclical relations in which poverty undermines education while educational exclusion reinforces poverty.

Musa’s trajectory, however, represents the opposite outcome: the internalisation of exclusion and collapse of educational aspiration. His statement, “*Mimi nishakwambia kuwa siwanii tena shule. Shule hakuna kitu!*” (“I already told you I no longer care about school. School is useless!”) (p.61), signals a shift from aspiration to resignation. As Walker and Unterhalter (2023) observe, prolonged exclusion often produces internalised marginality, where children withdraw from formal education and reorient themselves toward survival economies.

Collectively, these trajectories demonstrate that educational exclusion functions as a structural mechanism through which inequality is reproduced and normalised across generations. In line with Sen (1999) capability approach, education constitutes a foundational capability that expands individual freedoms and life chances; its denial therefore represents a restriction of substantive opportunity. Within *Watoto wa Maman’tilie*, this denial is not random but structurally patterned, producing a cycle in which poverty generates exclusion, exclusion limits mobility, and constrained mobility reproduces poverty.

Through the intersecting experiences of Peter, Zita, and Musa, Mbogo constructs educational exclusion as both a material and symbolic process that sustains urban inequality. Read alongside Spivak (1988), these children emerge as subaltern subjects whose educational deprivation reflects not

only economic marginalisation but also their structural positioning outside systems of recognition that would otherwise transform aspiration into opportunity.

Child labour, economic responsibility, and survival

In *Watoto wa Maman'tilie*, child labour emerges as a structurally produced manifestation of urban poverty and a defining feature of subaltern childhood. Rather than constituting an exceptional or deviant condition, children's participation in labour is normalised as an integral dimension of everyday survival within economically constrained urban households. Childhood is therefore reconfigured from a protected developmental stage into a socially produced condition of premature economic responsibility, shaped by deprivation, urban precarity, and institutional absence. Within this framework, children occupy what Spivak (1988) conceptualises as subaltern positions—social locations in which lived realities are structurally produced yet remain outside formal recognition within dominant institutional and economic systems.

This reconfiguration is first evident in the reclassification of generational roles within the household, where Zita is assigned adult status: "*Wewe siyo mtoto tena. Ni mwanamke, mtu mzima*" ("You are no longer a child. You are a woman, an adult") (p.36). The utterance signals not merely an emotional or rhetorical shift, but a structural redistribution of responsibility in which childhood is socially overwritten by economic necessity. Her routine involvement in informal economic activity, "*Kila kukicha Maman'tilie na Zita wanachukua sufuria, maharage, unga na kuni...*" ("Every day Maman'tilie and Zita carry pots, beans, flour and firewood...") (p. 15), illustrates how labour becomes embedded in the household

economy as a survival strategy. In this sense, the text reflects Nieuwenhuys's (2013) argument that child labour is not an external imposition but a socially organised practice through which survival responsibilities are redistributed across generations under conditions of poverty.

The narrative further extends children's labour beyond the domestic sphere into urban informal and high-risk economies, particularly the dumpsite economy. Peter's movement into this space, "*Peter aliondoka akaelekea jaa la Tabata*" ("Peter left and headed toward the Tabata dumpsite") (p. 50), marks his incorporation into a survival economy defined by precarity and uncertainty. The depiction of collective scavenging, "*wakichakurachakura, kubahatisha riziki zao*" ("scavenging in search of their livelihoods") (p. 21), demonstrates how informal labour becomes routinised under conditions of extreme deprivation. This routinisation, understood here as the normalization of survival-driven labour practices, signals the erosion of boundaries between childhood, work, and survival. As the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024) notes, such environments expose children to multiple dimensions of risk while simultaneously functioning as essential livelihood systems in marginalized urban contexts.

Within these conditions, labour is oriented toward immediate subsistence rather than accumulation or mobility. The recovery and consumption of discarded food, "*ungo wenye mchele wa dampo ulikuwa mbele yake*" ("a tray of rice from the dump lay before her") (p.39), illustrates how survival depends on the revaluation of waste as a resource. Peter's emotional response, "*Moyo wake ulijawa na furaha... watakula wali na nyama*" ("His heart was filled with joy... they would eat rice and meat") (p. 52), further

underscores how necessities acquire heightened affective significance under conditions of deprivation. As UNICEF (2023) observes, chronic poverty reshapes children's perception of need, normalising conditions that fall below socially acceptable thresholds of wellbeing.

The novel also exposes how labour extends into socially ambiguous and precarious survival practices that blur the boundary between formal and informal work. The phrase "*wapate kuingia 'kazini'*" ("so they could go to 'work'") (p. 44) is deployed ironically, foregrounding the distortion of "work" into a survival category rather than a regulated economic activity. Similarly, the collective struggle over discarded food, "*Walisongamana! Walisukumana, kupigania mchele*" ("They crowded together, pushing and fighting over rice") (p. 28), intensifies the representation of scarcity as a condition in which survival overrides dignity and social order. This aligns with Mbembe's (2001) theorisation of necropolitical urbanity, where life in postcolonial cities is sustained through fragmented, informal, and precarious economies of survival.

Using a Spivakian lens, these representations position children not only as economically marginalised subjects but also as subaltern actors whose lived realities are structurally produced yet remain socially unrecognised within dominant systems of knowledge, policy, and institutional visibility. Their labour does not register as formal economic participation, and their survival strategies exist outside institutional recognition, reinforcing their subaltern positionality.

Overall, *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* constructs child labour not as a deviation from normative childhood but as a structurally produced condition of urban inequality. Children's participation in vending, scavenging, and informal

labour reflects a broader reorganisation of generational responsibility under conditions of deprivation, where survival imperatives are systematically transferred onto children. In this configuration, subaltern childhood emerges as a labouring condition defined by precarity, constrained agency, and interrupted development. While such labour enables immediate survival, it simultaneously reproduces long-term exclusion from education, protection, and developmental security, thereby reinforcing children's marginalisation within urban society.

Negotiating hardship: children's agency and survival strategies

While preceding sections have demonstrated how structural poverty, family instability, educational exclusion, and child labour position children at the margins of urban society, *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* simultaneously constructs subaltern childhood as a site of situated agency. Rather than depicting children as passive recipients of deprivation, the novel shows how they actively negotiate constrained environments through improvisation, social embeddedness, and practical reasoning. This does not negate structural violence; instead, it reveals how agency is exercised within conditions already shaped by inequality. This reading aligns with contemporary childhood studies, which conceptualise children as social actors whose agency is exercised within, not outside, structures of constraint (Abebe, 2022; Spyrou, 2023).

Drawing on Spivak's conception of subalternity, this agency can be understood as operating under conditions of limited visibility and recognition. Spivak (1988) argues that subalternity is not simply marginalisation but a position shaped by constrained access to structures of recognition and voice within dominant social systems. In *Watoto wa*

Maman'tilie, children act and speak, yet their actions remain embedded in contexts where institutional systems, education, family governance, and urban economies fail to fully recognise or transform their lived realities. Agency, therefore, does not eliminate subalternity; it coexists with structural non-recognition.

One key expression of agency is persistence in the face of exclusion. Despite school expulsion and economic precarity, Peter repeatedly articulates forward-oriented intentions: “*Leo nitakwenda nijaribu*” (“Today I will go and try”) (p. 15), “*Nitakwenda ni bahatishe*” (“I will go and try my luck”) (p. 17), and “*Nina mipango yangu*” (“I have my own plans”) (p. 19). These statements reflect not resignation but adaptive futurity—an attempt to reinsert possibility into structurally constrained life conditions. His insistence, “*Mimi lazima nirudi shule*” (“I must return to school”) (p. 19), further underscores education as an aspirational horizon that persists despite institutional exclusion. As Ruth Evans (2021) notes, such everyday aspirations constitute a key modality of children’s agency under conditions of poverty.

Agency is also constructed through relational strategies that transform social isolation into networks of support. Peter’s address, “*Twende dada Kurwa*” (“Come, sister Kurwa”) (p. 57), signals the formation of solidarity-based relationships that extend beyond biological kinship. This is reinforced by the narrator’s observation that “*Tangu siku hiyo angekuwa sehemu kamili ya ukoo wa Mzee Lomolomo*” (“From that day onward, she would become a full member of Mzee Lomolomo’s family”) (p. 56). Similarly, Kurwa’s declaration, “*Sina kaka mwingine Peter. Wewe ndiye kaka yangu*” (“I have no other brother, Peter. You are my brother”) (p. 53), illustrates how children actively construct alternative kinship structures grounded in

reciprocity and emotional interdependence. In contexts where formal care systems are weakened, such relational formations become crucial survival infrastructures (Abebe, 2022).

Beyond relational agency, the novel foregrounds children's practical intelligence in navigating precarious environments. Kurwa emerges as a key figure whose decisions structure collective survival. Her directive, "*Mnakosea. Ni hivi*" ("You are mistaken. It should be done this way") (p. 44), and her strategic instruction, "*Mkishachukua mali mnatoka huku nyuma ... mnapotea kufuatia barabara ya Reli*" ("After taking the goods, leave through the back and disappear along the railway road") (p.44), demonstrate situational awareness and tactical reasoning. Such representations challenge deficit-oriented constructions of subaltern children by foregrounding their capacity for judgment, coordination, and adaptive problem-solving (Spyrou, 2023).

Cooperation further extends agency into collective survival practices. The instruction "*Nenda kalete gunia tugawane*" ("Go and get a sack so that we can share") (p. 29) illustrates how redistribution and sharing operate as survival logics under scarcity. This is reinforced by the optimistic assertion "*Leo nakwambia tuna bahati*" ("Today, I am telling you, we are lucky") (p. 29), which reveals how hope functions as a psychological resource sustaining endurance under precarity. Agency here is not only behavioural but also affective, embedded in the ability to sustain meaning under deprivation.

Conclusion

The findings presented above indicate that *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* constructs subaltern childhood as a contradictory condition in which

vulnerability and agency are co-constituted. Children are structurally positioned within systems of deprivation that limit recognition, opportunity, and institutional support; yet within these constraints, they actively generate strategies of survival, relational solidarity, and aspirational persistence. In Spivakian terms, their agency does not resolve subalternity but rather unfolds within its limits, revealing how survival itself becomes a form of negotiated existence under conditions of persistent marginalisation.

This reconfiguration aligns with contemporary childhood studies that reject universalised constructions of childhood and instead emphasise its social, historical, and economic embeddedness. Within this framework, the novel positions children as located within structural arrangements that determine access to schooling, livelihood opportunities, and social protection. Childhood is therefore not simply experienced but socially organised through inequality, where urban space becomes a key site in which exclusion is both produced and made visible.

From a subaltern theoretical perspective, particularly drawing on Spivak (1988), the children's subjectivities emerge within conditions where articulation is possible but structurally constrained. Their experiences are not absent from expression; rather, they are expressed through immediate, situational, and materially grounded forms of understanding. This produces a form of subjectivity that is neither fully silenced nor fully recognised within dominant social and institutional frameworks. Instead, it exists within a tension between lived experience and limited representability.

Importantly, the novel does not reduce subaltern childhood to passive victimhood. The preceding findings demonstrate that children actively respond to structural constraints through adaptive strategies, relational

networks, and practical engagement with their environment. These responses indicate that agency is not external to subaltern conditions but is produced within them. Children's subjectivities are therefore formed through both constraint and negotiation, revealing the coexistence of vulnerability and agency in everyday life.

This reimagining of childhood fundamentally shifts its meaning from a normative developmental category to a socially situated condition produced within urban inequality. Childhood becomes visible not through institutional ideals such as uninterrupted schooling or stable family structures, but through lived experiences of exclusion and adaptation. In this sense, the novel reframes childhood as a relational and uneven experience shaped by broader socioeconomic structures.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* constructs subaltern childhoods through the interconnected experiences of poverty, family instability, educational exclusion, parental neglect, and social insecurity. The children's lives are shaped by structural inequalities that limit their access to care, protection, and opportunities, positioning them at the margins of urban society. At the same time, the novel portrays their efforts to cope with hardship, assume responsibilities, and navigate everyday challenges. Through these representations, Mbogo presents childhood as a socially constructed condition marked by the coexistence of vulnerability and survival, revealing the complex realities of marginalized children in urban Tanzania.

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