



International Journal of African Studies

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

The Child in the Story: Depicting the Child in Selected Works of Gambian Authors

Cherno Omar Barry*

¹Vice Chancellor and President of the International Open University, 21 Kanifing Mosque Road, P.O. Box 2340, Kanifing South, KMC, The Gambia. E-mail: cobarry@iou.edu.gm

Article Info

Volume 2, Issue 1, June 2022

Received : 25 October 2021

Accepted : 19 May 2022

Published : 05 June 2022

doi: [10.51483/IJAFRS.2.1.2022.17-26](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJAFRS.2.1.2022.17-26)

Abstract

Issues affecting the common people or related to marginal lives constitute the greater part of the novellas and novels published in *The Gambia*. Several authors use the child as a hero and with the child, built themes around the school, travel, adventure, crime, city life, sexuality, and several other issues. Other themes touch on politics and socio-cultural issues. Many youths of colonial and post-independent Gambia would remember the didactic tales in the Aesop's fables, the tales of Charles Perrault, the Fontaine tales, and other works of children literature. These are stories that consciously emphasises role-model qualities to the intended child-reader. The coming of western education to West Africa and particularly to The Gambia brought with it the tales of the colonisers. Books such as the works of Charles Dickens (David Copperfield, Great Expectations, Oliver Twist), Mark Twain (The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the Adventures of Tom Sawyer) have been used for decades in the African schools. However, the socio-cultural realities of the African child were never captured in those tales. In this paper, we intend to give an overview on how the child is depicted in the works of a selected works of Gambian writers. The school story, either set within or around the school, remained a dominant theme in the early works of Gambian writers, particularly in the early 20th Century. It is an environment where most children grow and develop and it is an appropriate setting where authors explore issues such as rural-urban migration, the education of the girl child, early marriage, and early pregnancy, as well as social-cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and violence against women, among others.

Keywords: *Afrocentricity, Black/African heroes, Mandela, Western mainstream media*

© 2022 Cherno Omar Barry. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

Children encounter stories in the form of a discovery of self and the world. Martha Robinson explained that, '...the average child wants to know everything, to experience all the emotions, to believe in the world of fantasy, to revel in it while he can'. Most stories therefore have a happy conclusion, and they-lived-happily-ever-after ending of a story that will undoubtedly send the child dreaming. Curiosity in children is another ingredient. They are curious by nature and would love to discover everything, the hidden and the disclosed, the real and the unreal, the possible and the impossible. They need the world of the known and the unknown, and as Robinson rightly puts it, 'So fact and fiction are equally fascinating and need only be presented in the most palatable form to be swallowed with relish, like an appetising meal'.

* Corresponding author: Cherno Omar Barry, Vice Chancellor and President of the International Open University, 21 Kanifing Mosque Road, P.O. Box 2340, Kanifing South, KMC, The Gambia. E-mail: cobarry@iou.edu.gm

2710-4680/© 2022. Cherno Omar Barry. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

This paper intends to share works of some of those authors who can be categorized as writers of Children's literature and give some focus on those who wrote on issues that affect children. Main authors whose works will be explored are Sally Sadi Singhateh, Edou Dibba, Baba Galleh Jallow, Musa Jallow, Ebou Gaye, Sheriff Samsudeen Sarr, and Balla Saho. The works will cover would mainly be prose, but references would be made to drama too. The central themes would be on migration, adventure, school life, socio-cultural issues affecting them, however, some issues, particularly those on gender matters, attracted a wider range of writers and would not all be covered here. Our intention is to give a glimpse on how the child is reflected in the story by Gambian writers as a hero and as a victim.

2. The Child in School

The issue of the child growing up in school has been a central theme for many African authors some of which were captured in autobiographies and semi-autobiographies, such as, *The African Child* by the Guinean Camara Laye and *The Ambiguous Adventure* by the Senegalese Cheick Hamidou Kane where school life is central to the general theme.

Martha Robinson noted:

School life has always been a passionate interest to the young reader, starting way back with Tom Brown's Schooldays, through the innumerable boarding schools for girls by Angela Brazil and her followers, to the more glamorous and outstandingly successful ballet books by Noel Streatfield, and on to books about our comprehensive schools (Robinson, 1982).

Stories around the school are also closely linked to the realities of the child. One discovers in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, *The Undesirable Element* by Muhamed Sule and *Patience is Accompanied by Smile* by Ebou Gaye stories around the school but closely linked to the family. *Olu and the Smugglers and Meet me in Conakry*, by Ebou Dibba and Sheriff S Sarr respectively, have young children as the protagonists whose lives of adventure evolve around the school. The same is true of *Alhaji* (Dibba Ebou, 1992), *Christie's Crises* (Singhateh, 1998), and *Across the Scenes* (Jallow Musa, 1998) (Table 1).

Surname	Name	Book Title	Year of Publication
Dibba	Ebou	<i>Alhaji</i>	1992
Gaye	Ebou	<i>Patience is Accompanied by Smile</i>	1997
Jallow	Musa	<i>Across the Scenes</i>	1998
Peters	Lenrie	<i>The Second Round</i>	1965
Roberts	Gabriel	<i>The Goosieganderan Myth</i>	1998
Saho	Bala	<i>The Road to my Village</i>	1994
Singhateh	Sally	<i>Christie's Crisis</i>	1998

We will discover two types of authors: those who will clearly use the school premises as a means of sharing their experiences in a semi-autobiographical manner such as Ebou Gaye's *Patience is Accompanied by Smile* and Musa Jallow's *Across the Scenes* and others who will make the school an adventure for the child such as Ebou Dibba's *Olu and the Smugglers* and *Alhaji*, and Sally Sadie Singhateh's *Christie's Crises* and *The Sun will soon Shine*.

We discover for example the controversial corporal punishment, an act prohibited in the mid-twentieth Century with the coming of child rights and the laws against child abuse and violence. Strictly defined, 'corporal punishment' is the infliction of pain intended to change a person's behavior or to punish them. It is an act practiced in most families as a pre-requisite in bringing up a well-disciplined child. In *Patience is Accompanied by Smile*, Gaye does not entirely condemn the act...

Some students screaming, some growling while others were weeping. At that moment, I could no longer control the warm tears that were rolling downwards along my cheeks. After the filth round, I withdrew my right hand and stretched the left. My alter ego, Bai, on seeing the blood that was oozing from these wounded palms, decided to subject his cheeks to the heavy slap of the corn palm of the torturer in exchange for the strokes of the cane (Gaye, 1997).

Gaye is of the believe that to mould the child into a disciplined person one cannot spare the rod. Therefore, when his protagonist Sulayman went to tell his mother of the harsh punishment he was subjected to by his brother, his mother replied, “Dodou wishes you well and wants to cultivate ethical values in you”. The author comes from a society where discipline and corporal punishment are not dissociated.

Bala Saho in his book *The Road to my Village* also shows the act of corporal punishment inflicted on students. However, unlike Gaye, Saho tends to show its negative effects in a comical manner.

The teacher raised his hand. He raised it above his head so that one could count his ribs. He had a blackboard ruler in his hand. Meanwhile a boy was being stretched by four of the biggest boys in the class. He brought the stick wood down on the boy’s back (Saho, 1994).

Public flogging was a common sight up to the early nineties on Monday and Friday mornings when the school general assembly is being conducted. A blackboard ruler or a bamboo cane was used, and, in most schools, there is always a teacher known for giving the lashes such that the mere mention of his/her name would calm all ripples of disruptions. Gaye will introduce us to Ustaz Cham, a Koranic teacher who abuses the privilege of punishing the children. He represents many of those teachers who deliberately use corporal punishment to terrorise the children unjustly. In the case of Ustaz Cham, the children are generally so terrorised that they cannot help being caught doing something wrong. This, however, does not satisfy Ustaz who takes the pleasure of his authority in the classroom to instil more terror on the children by inventing crimes none has committed. For example, he will share sweets to all the pupils and will later ask to be returned the sweets. Those unfortunate pupils who have already sucked theirs will therefore be subjected to a punishment of Ustaz’s choice.

However, for more than a decade now, the advocacy to completely prohibit corporal punishment has gained much momentum but not without resistance in many countries that do not explicitly spell out its condemnation in their legislature.

The majority of states worldwide have prohibited corporal punishment in schools. As at May 2015, corporal punishment is unlawful in all schools in 125 states, including 46 states where it is prohibited in all settings including the home. In a further 11 states, legislation prohibits corporal punishment in some but not all schools (End Violence Against Children, 2015).

The Gambia remains one of those countries, including Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, and Singapore, where corporal punishment is authorised at the school but administered lightly and only by the school head or a person authorized by the school head.

Beyond the general school ground, several authors made a closer look at the child-teacher relationship. Two types of relations stand out: the child who finds a particular teacher hateful or wicked, and the promiscuous relationship between a child and a teacher—the latter being more frequent between a male teacher and a female pupil/student but not excluding the reverse. In Ebou Dibba’s *Alhaji*, the protagonist—also called Alhaji—found his mathematics teacher, Quasi, quite unfriendly towards him. Quasi has the habit of constantly asking Alhaji questions at times when the latter is paying less attention to maths lessons. However, it is easy to assume that Alhaji is right over the maths teacher’s attitude towards him when he hardly pays attention in class, particularly when he constantly daydreams about his horse.

3. The Child as Hero

One form of children’s literature is detective stories where the main characters are mainly children. Detective stories do not have to be adult boring stories of detection but those of adventure with a lot of suspense and danger and in which the child hero successfully uncovers the secret or stops the bad people on time. The child hero does not necessarily have the permission or the expertise to indulge into detection and that tinge of danger makes the story very closely related to the child reader. It brings out in the child reader that adventure he or she craves for and that unique desire to want to do something for once without having to have an adult decide what to do best.

Young readers enjoy reading strange phenomena and suspense, particularly in adventure. Adventure implies excitement and danger. Adventure stories describe strange situations, journeys in strange lands, captures and escapes, test of skill and courage, and so on. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* both by C.S. Lewis present extraordinary adventures full of magic and suspense. Other works where authors have skilfully married adventure and fantasy or magic are J.R.R. Tolkein’s *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, and J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. These are the stories where children find themselves as heroes, adventurers that raise them to the belief.

Young protagonists solving crime is not new in Children's fiction. The Nancy Drew Series, the Hardy Boys series and similar works have produced exciting works of crime where the young protagonists are school-going children who will use their skills to solve crime. Children tend to enjoy the feeling of being able to overcome hurdles and obstacles and most importantly accomplish feats that adults are known for being the only ones able to do. Dibba's *Olu and the Smugglers* and *Alhaji* are two books in which the young protagonists are seen to be involved in solving a crime and bringing dangerous criminals to book. Singhateh's *Christie's Crises* also falls under the same category (Table 2).

Name	Title of Book	Year Published
Dibba Ebou	<i>Alhaji</i>	1992
Dibba Ebou	<i>Olu and the Smugglers</i>	1980
Singhateh Sally	<i>Christie's Crisis</i>	1998

In 1980, Dibba publishes the first novel destined for children called *Olu and the Smugglers*. Olu is a nephew to Yancouba and Abi who live near the beach. Olu is known for being very imaginative and has the gift of exaggeration. Following bizarre reports of food poisoning caused by the consumption of canned beef, Olu and Abu, his friend, will soon discover that smugglers are using the canned beef to store diamonds and smuggle them out of the country, but not without the connivance of the police sergeant of the town, Demfa. In this story, which can be considered the first adventure story written by a Gambian, gave young Gambian readers the opportunity to discover their own literature and enjoy the adventure in it.

In *Alhaji*, the young schoolboy Alhaji, who has a beautiful horse also called Alhaji, is involved in a diamond trafficking story. One tends to ask why Dibba uses such a boy of tender age to be dragged in a clandestine activity involving professional diamond traffickers. In an interview with Hassoum Ceesay, the curator of the Banjul Museum and literary critic, he says:

I myself find Dibba's Alhaji a little strange. As I never had the privilege to ask him the question, I can only advance my opinion. Dibba might have preferred using a young schoolboy, Alhaji, for two reasons: the first is to show how young innocent children at that age can be vulnerable and easily influenced by the criminal acts poisoning our societies today. We notice how both Alhaji and his horse are easily dragged into the story. The horse became the easy means to transport the diamonds clandestinely across the border. The second reason might be to showcase that today's children can easily be involved in matters that are adult related.

Even though Dibba created a story full of suspense where both Alhaji and his horse are seen to be manipulated by powerful criminals, children will certainly find it very fascinating that the protagonist will make daring decisions, working with the police and the Maths teacher he hates, and who turns out to be a secret agent, to bring the criminals to book. However, another aspect of the story that is worth reflecting on is the other attitudes of the schoolboy: negligence of his studies, following tourists at the beach, which is called *bumstaring*, problems with his friends, conflict with his subject teacher and particularly his relationship with the traffickers. For example, Alhaji seeks for a lift to go to school. Even though we have not been told anything about his parents by the author, we deduce that Alhaji lives in Bakau and comes from a poor background. Like all the youths of his age who go to Banjul for school, seeking a lift is seen to be very common among these young school goers. However, Dibba wishes to further show us how unserious Alhaji was with going to school when the latter said:

So, I stopped under the big silk cotton tree, and to be honest, I did not give a damn whether a car or van drew up or not. I knew I would be late again for school, but the headmaster 'understands' he says, and I do not get punished (Dibba, 1992).

Alhaji loves to go to the beach with his horse and in this story, Dibba refers to Bungalow Beach hotel. Dibba describes the beach and clearly wishes to give us an insight of the school going children running away from school and going to the beach to *bumst*¹ the tourist. Alhaji says, "If I had my way, I'd just work on the beach in the tourist season with Alhaji (Dibba, 1992)."

1 To bumst, or a bumpster are expression very common in The Gambia. They refer to the act of following tourists and attempting to establish a relationship which can range from simple gifts to marriage and a trip to Europe. Individuals doing that are called bumpsters.

We are quick to discover that both Ebou Dibba and Sally Sadie Singhateh will portray characters that have similar backgrounds to the authors. In *Christie's Crises*, Singhateh will build a suspense throughout the story over the death of Christie's father. As the heroine is a young school going kid, her student life will be central in the story and the school will serve as the setting. We will therefore discover how a set of students, from a middle-class family, live their lives. Three significant characteristics that cannot be found in the other authors' works are noted: the strong friendship between the students, the conflicts, and the solidarity between them.

Christie comes from a single parent family where she lives with her mother. Her best friend, Bin has her own room and her own personal phone. This is the elitist type of families who are known to live in specified areas of the Greater Banjul area such as Fajara, Cape Point, Pipeline, and very recently Kerr Serign and Brusubi. No Gambian writer will give a more succinct family setting of the elites better than Sally Singhateh who knows that setting better than the modest setting that Ebou Dibba, Musa Jallow or other writers know about. Even in her other works such as *Baby Trouble* and *The Sun Will Soon Shine*, we can still feel the middle-class type of family resurfacing. Christie also lives in a unique family setting which is rare among the common Gambian as families live in extended family settings mainly and have several parents clustered together. It is rare to see a single mother raising her child in a home where they are the only ones who live there. Today, however, families have evolved and live-in similar settings.

Bin and Christie represent the school girls of today who are concerned with what they wear, about parties and about boyfriends. Even though Christie is dating Zack, she has a crush on Tijan Waggeh, another kid from a middle-class family. The coming of Christie's grandmother will divert the story to a more exciting path. The grandmother has a secret and Christie is adamant to find out what it is about. With the help of her friends – Bin, Tijan and Ali – Christie will play the detective and will soon discover that Christie's father was in fact alive and was married to another woman. She further discovers that Musa Lou is a twin and was involved in drug trafficking. This is an adventure story of young school going children coming from well-to-do families and representing the core student body going to Gambia High School, Saint Augustine's High School and Saint Joseph High School, as well as prestigious private schools such as Marina International, SBEC International or West African International School. It gives a good contrast with the Ebou Dibba's *Olu and the Smugglers* and *Alhaji*.

Adventure, as depicted in the referenced children's literature above, brings to the reader suspense and surprises that would very much mesmerize the reader. These types of novels clearly showed the level of psychological maturity of the characters are not of a major concern to the reader. There is no doubt that there is adult literature of the same category such as *The Will* by Joseph Joof in which surprises are constant, but the adventure in the reviewed works above remains unique and fascinating to the young reader.

4. Travel and Migration

Gambians are known to be great travellers and for many years the issues surrounding rural-urban drift and illegal migration to Europe, Scandinavia and the USA have started emerging in Gambian works (Table 3). The rural-urban drift has been common since the colonial era mainly because the Colony has always been the hub of activity and where all the senior schools are found. However, such a drift has caused the rural areas to be depopulated and the support that the farmer-parents needed for their farms from their children dwindled considerably. City life does not seem to offer a better life always because children are easily influenced and would indulge into petty crime, premature sex, drugs, fights and constantly breaking the law. Musa Jallow in *Across the Scenes* clearly shows us the dangers youth face once they leave their villages and try to adapt to the life in the city. Samba, the protagonist in *Across the Scenes*, moves to the city with the help of the headmaster, who approves of Samba's hard work but turns out to be a bad judge of character. Samba's father was reluctant to send him to the city and his excuse was that the school was expensive, and Samba would have nowhere to stay. The Headmaster will convince Samba's father and even propose to have the boy live with the Headmaster's brother in the city. However, as soon as Samba began to get use to the boys, he discovers other distractions other than his studies.

In order 'to get rid of any traces of "jondoism"' Samba begins smoking and soon after many other vices follow stealing, drugs, women, etc. *Jondoism* is a coined word labeled to those who do not 'belong' and are afraid to blend within a group of adolescents who see life differently. Students coming from the rural areas are almost always considered uncultured and ignorant of the civilized way of life. Unfortunately, this continues to be a trend even today and many who refuse to be part of the "civilized" group are ostracised and sometimes even badly treated and humiliated. As for the girls, being current and a part of the group means giving away one's virginity which could lead to pregnancy. Jay becomes a good example.

That way many have got loose, and like Jay, left school prematurely, to become unexpectedly mothers. Who at their best have only added to the increasing burden of their own parents, while the boys assume irresponsible fatherhood? The present trend being already alarming is a pointer to an abysmal moral degeneration, which could certainly be catastrophic unless a positive step is taken (Jallow, 1998, p. 84).

Demba Ceesay, in his book *The Worn-out Dream*, clearly depicts the plight of a village boy who abandons the family heritage to seek for fortune in the city. Omar, the main character, is forced by the fear of poverty to escape to the city without heeding the advice of his parents and he confronted alienation and discrimination before being trapped in the bad ways of the urban areas. Unlike Samba in *Across the Scenes*, Omar had to finally give up the city when he turned mad and return to the village where, after being treated, settled to take over his father's business. Where Jallow intends to give us an overview of the influence of the city life to a young school-going kid, Ceesay goes further to craft a moral lesson out of the rural-urban migration.

Table 3: Authors Who Wrote About Travel and Migration		
Author	Book	Year Published
Colley Essa	<i>If I am Right or Wrong</i>	1993
Gaye Ebou	<i>Patience is Accompanied by Smile</i>	1997
Jallow Musa	<i>Across the Scenes</i>	1998
Saho Bala	<i>The Road to my Village</i>	1994
Sarr Sheriff Samsudeen	<i>Meet Me in Conakry</i>	1984
Singhateh Sally	<i>Christie's Crisis</i>	1998
Demba Ceesay	<i>Worn Out Dream</i>	2013

One other thing that gradually creeps into the minds of these youth, particularly those who come from the rural areas to stay in the urban area, is what is known as the 'nerves' syndrome. The 'nerves' syndrome signifies the desire to venture to the developed countries such as those in Europe, Scandinavian or even North America in search for 'greener pastures'. Some of these journeys are made on justifiable reasons (education, visits, or legal migration), however, most of these journeys involve taking huge risks by frustrated youths who seek for an Eldorado in these destinations and sometimes quick riches. Some parents support this by pushing their children to take huge risks and they would sell their valuables (land, jewellery, and other expensive assets) to finance the journey. As a result of the severe visa regulations, youth are either involved in visa scams or take the dangerous route by sea known as backway to Europe: journey by sea through Spain. These concerns did not go unnoticed by writers and both Papa Jeng and Kalilu Jammeh capture it well in *Boat Boys: Barcelona Or Barrsaxa* (2007) and *Journey to Misery – From The Gambia to Spain* (2011) respectively. Bala Saho also slightly indicated such a desire in *The Road to My Village*.

Rural-urban drift and illegal migration are attracting much interest among the young writers but very few really wrote much about these and mostly, the works under study do not target the young reader when such issues are mentioned. Violence and other socio-cultural practices considered harmful have attracted many authors too and have produced many works. Social-cultural issues are centered mainly on force marriages, early pregnancy, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). These issues are closely related to traditional practices and some of the practices are not justifiable but vehemently defended by the society that practice it. Mostly, it is the girl child who suffers such practices.

5. Violence and Bad Socio-Cultural Practices Against the Child

Violence against the child, especially the girl child, has had its diverse and controversial definitions mainly because women living in a patriarchal society are expected to accept certain cultural and traditional practices, mainly dictated by men. For example, a girl turning to a woman, is subjected to several practices in such societies and having anybody questioning any of these traditions would be considered an insult to the people practicing them. In *the Graveyard Cannot Pray* (2013) by Baba Galleh Jallow, the narrator who is the father of Tulie, a young innocent girl tries to defend the girl from going through the traditional female circumcision or FGM. The practice is believed to be sanctioned by Islam and many ethnic groups have been practicing this for centuries. Jallow wrote,

Female circumcision was not universally practiced in my community. Among the five ethnic groups living together in the same village space, two major groups did not practice female circumcision. These were the Serer, my wife's people; and the Wolof, who owned one of the three most widely spoken languages in The Gambia. The Mandinka, the Manjako, the Jola and my people the Fulani all performed female circumcision. It was unthinkable for a girl to grow up among any of these people without undergoing circumcision (Jallow, 2013).

The Graveyard Cannot Pray is the third edition of a personal touching story of the author, Baba G Jallow, on Female Genital Mutilation and his fight to defend his daughter from the practice. The author, who is believed to have written this book to share a true account of his struggle against a well-entrenched practice against which it is hard to fight, will face several challenges and will have the whole society against him. Worst still, as his wife is from the Serer tribe and they do not practice it, his wife will be considered by the Fulani, his own tribe, as unclean.

Singhateh (2004), in *The Sun Will Soon Shine* shares the plight of the protagonist, Nyima, who had to be forced through the process of circumcision despite the deceased father's wish to have her exempted from the practice. When Nyima was married to her husband who was old enough to be her father, old Pa Momat, he discovers she was not circumcised, and it brought much shame to the family. The mere thought of being a *solijo*, a *bilakoro* or a *solimaa* is an abomination. So, the mother watched helplessly as Nyima is dragged off to be cut at her age...

The degree of the pain is difficult to express in words. All I felt was that if it did not subside, I would die. I prayed, amidst my torment, to the Almighty to take back the life he had given me thus relieving me from such cruelty. He almost answered my prayers, for the next instant, I lost consciousness (Singhateh, 2004).

FGM is considered a violent and an unhealthy practice which has over the years generated so much advocacy against the practice that several countries passed laws to condemn the practice totally. This is the case in the Gambia following former President Yahya Jammeh's declaration during his March 2016 Meet the Farmer's tour. Soon after that, the proposal is passed at the National Assembly and constituted into law when it was given approval by almost all the members of parliament. A little before that, many debates have been raging on as to the link between the practice and Islam. Many respected Islamic scholars quite agree that as Islam is silent about condemning the practice, it is highly recommended for it to be done. However, other scholars refute this and consider the harmful effects as more of a reason to condemn it. When Baba G Jallow made inquiries about the justification, he concluded that...

The only reason most of them gave was that it was their culture, their tradition; they found their ancestors practicing it, so they practice it too. A few added that it was also a way of purifying women, a way of initiating girls into womanhood, a way of teaching them the ways of womanhood and a way of reducing sexual promiscuity and protecting virginity. I weighed these reasons against the consequences of female circumcision, and I concluded that it simply was not worth the risk. These were not good enough reasons. All the religious scholars and elders I approached with the question said female circumcision was a revered custom but was neither a religious obligation ordained by God in the Holy *Quran* nor a Sunnah, an example insisted upon by the Prophet Muhammad (Jallow, 2013).

Other socio-cultural practices that generally affect the youth, but more specifically the girl child, is early marriage. In most cases this is arranged marriage or forced marriage in which the girl child is always the victim. Most of the writers who have written on this are the women writers, perhaps because it affects them more. Dramatists like Lady Augustus Mahoney Jawara and Janet Badjan Young will both take a strong advocacy stance to promote girl education through their plays. Lady Augusta wrote the play *Rebellion* and Janet Badjan Young wrote and staged *The Hand of Fate?*

Nyima in *The Sun Will Soon Shine* and Nysata in *Rebellion* both had to go through the same couching from their elders. When Nyima insisted she wanted to further her education, this was the reply,

'Child, you have received more education than any girl or woman in our village and of course, most men. You are the envy of every woman because you have gone up to primary six. I am sure your mother has taught you that women are brought into this world to serve their husbands and bear them children. You have had enough education, now you must put to use the qualities the almighty God has given you. It is time you become a wife and mother. Education, you leave to us, the men' (Singhateh, 2004).

Unlike Nyima in *The Sun Will Soon Shine*, who succumbs to the pressure of the society and whose mother made little effort to help her, and who finally was forced into marriage, forcefully circumcised, and bullied into being subservient to her husband and society, Nysata in *Rebellion* will not be easily cajoled. In fact, she has a more challenging situation because her father is a chief and he continued to insist that he would not let down the society he leads by setting a bad example. Her father, however, silently supports her claims to education and Nysata will continue to fight. In a conversation

with her sister, Nyma, she tries to convince her that they should stand up against the traditions that force them into early marriage and fight hard to be heard.

NYMA: (Stands up and takes a few steps away from Nysata) But how can we do it?

NYSATA: (Follows Nyma. She now holds her around the shoulders) First of all, by insisting to go to school, refusing to marry at 14 years, and demanding liberty to marry the man we choose. You are only a baby, Nyma; you have no right to be talking about marriage at the age of 14 years. Can't you see that? Listen Nyma, we must save our sex from the exploitation of men. I have a plot—we can start our cry for freedom by staging a tools-down demonstration. We shall choose a day when no woman in Sutuko will work and every man in this village will starve. Then we shall at least begin to gain some respect from our men.

NYMA: But I don't understand; will you starve your own father?

NYSATA: For weeks, if necessary (Kinteh (2015) 1968, p. 9).

In *So Long a Letter* by the Senegalese writer Mariama Ba, men hardly consider an educated woman useful elsewhere despite the growing number of educated women. In a conversation between Daouda and Ramatoulaye, when Daouda nurtures the idea that women are destructive once outside their homes and that many women in the National Assembly would be disastrous to the country, Ramatoulaye retorts,

But we are not incendiaries; rather, we are stimulants!' And I pressed on: 'In many fields, and without skirmishes, we have taken advantage of the notable achievements that have reached us from elsewhere, the gains wrested from the lessons of history.

We have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to be able to pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. We have a right to equal well-paid employment, to equal opportunities. The right to vote is an important weapon (Ba, 1981, pp. 61-62).

In the same vein when Nysata is being asked to marry to respect tradition and avoid spending long years in school, she refused. On the other hand, Nyima was betrothed to Pa Momat when she was little and the family, having enjoyed Pa Momat's wealth, could not refuse the arrangement any longer however inappropriate. In the play *The Hand of Fate?* by Janet Badjan Young, Aminata's father, Baba, is coerced into giving away his daughter to a so-called wealthy Gambian residing in Europe in return for riches. Baba seems desperate to sort out his problems and his brother Momodou seems to just find the right solution – sell away Aminata to a hustler. When Baba's brother asked him how he was doing, Baba replied...

I am not a happy man, I have too many problems. A leaking roof, My corrugated roof is 20 years old! The sheets want to retire. They are old, rusty and tired. I have to replace them. Then there is Aminata. She is doing well at school. I will need money to send her to the University of The Gambia. She is too bright to finish school and sit around here waiting for a husband (Young, 2009, p. 21).

However, Baba will easily be influenced by Momodou, who will not waste time to see that a deal is met where he can also get a lion share of the wealth brought to the family. Momodou's influence over Baba and his family is so great that he single-handedly masterminded all the marriage arrangements, pocketing the little money coming their way. Baba becomes impervious to the pleas of his wife Fatoumata and his mother-in-law. This seems to infuriate Baba more as she remembers what he was subjected to when he asked for Fatoumata's hand in marriage. Janet Badjan Young clearly wants us to understand that the society forces girls out of school and marry them off either because they are already indebted to the suitor or they expect huge monetary gains out of the marriage. This is very often, one major problem in the society and Singhateh equally spelled it out well in *The Sun Will Soon Shine*.

Amie Sillah and Dayo Forster both wrote on women issues in their books *Silent Voices: short stories on gender issues in The Gambia and Reading the Ceiling*, respectively. Other writers such as Mathilda Johnson, Juka Fatou Jabang and Ann Therese Ndong Jatta added their voices through poetry in their collection *The Repeal* and in Juka Jabang's collection *The Phoenix*. Michael Hamadi Secka is another prolific writer who has given much insight on the vulnerable particularly the girl child. Three of his books, certainly destined for adult readers but which are relevant to the theme, are: *It is your Conscience that Matters*, *The Shock*, and *Education in Tears and Women in Distress*. Amie Sillah's non-fiction narration of incidents in the lives of the common Gambians in her book *Silent Voices* gives quite a vivid reality of gender issues in our times: broken marriages, a marriage with distant spouses, bigamy where one marries a white tourist and hides the African wife, women suffering in silence in their marriages, etc. Gender issues touch early marriage, forced marriage, arranged marriage, early pregnancy, female circumcision, and a host of other societal ills that

need addressed. However, these books are not destined for children's readers but a much wider public, especially parents, to advocate for the immediate stoppage of such practices.

6. Conclusion

In a modest effort to give a cultural overview of the child in the works of selected Gambian authors, we are conscious of the limitation in our scope and the diverse range of issues surrounding the many themes regarding children. First, we limited our analysis to a selected works of Gambian authors principally because the corpus constitutes the authors who have on one hand shared their life experiences—consciously or unconsciously—in their maiden works or have a story they know they wish to tell. Most of the selected authors have not necessary published many books and cannot therefore be called renowned writers, yet their works touch the lives of the children that call for our attention. Peculiar in our selection is the target group for which these writers prepared their work. Upon a closer observation of our literature review our analysis reveal the following:

1. Some of the selected works are adventures involving children – *Alhaji* (Dibba), *Olu and the Smugglers* (Dibba), *Across the Scenes* (M. Jallow), *The Road to my Village* (Saho), *Christie's Crisis* (Singhateh) – thus we consider the target group to be young readers who will eventually enjoy and relish the adventures.
2. Other major works tackle issues related to children but not clearly targeting the youth as a readership. However, such work can be read by young adults who will savor the issues touching their lives - *The Sun Will Soon Shine* (Singhateh), *The Graveyard Cannot Pray* (B.G. Jallow) and *Patience is Accompanied by Smile* (Gaye),
3. Several themes were elaborated here that could well be developed in a separate paper because the literature review would include books of diverse nature but on similar themes. Generally, such books are destined for adults: *Reading the Ceiling* (Forster), *Silent Voices: Short stories on Gender issues in The Gambia* (Sillah), *Things Happen on the Way to the Well...* (Ceeday), *Baby Trouble* (Singhateh), *The Shock* (Secka), *The Mysterious Odyssey of a Village Boy* (Mamburay), and *Jangi Jollof* (Sabally).
4. Folktales and bedtime stories have been excluded in the corpus of our work even though they are generally destined for children. Most of the stories of Charles Perrault have been translated in many languages and taught or recommended for reading for children. Our theme is however restricted to the works produced by Gambians and not the transcribed folktales. This could nevertheless be of great interest if it is explored on a separate paper.

Many Gambian writers have developed interest in writing stories destined for young readers. In the process many young writers have emerged and contributed to the body of literature. Critics would still question the quality of work of these emerging young writers; however, the passion and talent seem to be growing well, particularly in the novellas and theater. The question of advocacy in the defence of the youth and the girl keeps growing with the emerging trends. Young emerging writers like Adam Nyang, Mary Wadda, Ngasireh Irene Touray, Mary Caroline Gomez and a host of others have embraced the prose fiction and are producing books that relate to the issues affecting the young. In addition, a group of young talented youngsters have emerged strongly with the creation of Balafong, Black Magic, Rhythmic Vibrations and Word of Mouth. These gatherings and events have demonstrated perceptive talent among the youth in drama, poetic music, and comedy. This herald a young generation taking ownership of showbiz with a purpose to delight in the modern Shakespearean touch.

With the publication challenges and particularly the required rigour to edit and proofread works before publications, most of the works found in the bookstores published in the last two decades seem to call for much review and improvement. Perhaps a new generation will emerge directing writing towards a new paradigm shift?

References

- Ba, Mariama. (1981). *So Long A Letter*. Dakar. Heinemann.
- Dibba, Ebou. (1992). *Alhaji*. Hong Kong. Macmillan Press Ltd.
- End Violence Against Children. (2015). *Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children. Towards Non-Violent Schools: Prohibiting all Corporal Punishments*. Global Report. London: Global Initiative and Save the Children.
- Gaye, Ebou. (1997). *Patience is Accompanied by a Smile*. Banjul. The Observer Company Ltd.
- Jallow, Baba Galleh. (2013). *The Graveyard Cannot Pray*. Leicester. Global Hands Publishing.
- Jallow, Musa. (1998). *Across the Scenes*. Kanifing. Printing and Stationery Corporation.

- Kinteh, Ramatoulie. (2015, 1968). *Rebellion: A Play in Three Acts*. New York. Philosophical Library, Inc.
- Sarr, Sheriff Samsudeen. (1984). *Meet me in Conakry*. London. Basingstoke. Macmillan Education Publishers.
- Singhateh, Sally Sadie. (1998). *Christie's Crisis*. East African Educational Publishers. Kenya.
- Singhateh, Sally Sadie. (2004). *The Sun Will Soon Shine*. Athena Press, London.
- Young, Janet Badjan. (2009). *The Hand of Fate? Serrekunda*. Ebunjan Theatre Troupe.

Cite this article as: Cherno Omar Barry (2022). *The Child in the Story: Depicting the Child in Selected Works of Gambian Authors*. *International Journal of African Studies*. 2(1), 17-26. doi: 10.51483/IJAFRS.2.1.2022.17-26.