

Childhood Agency and Philosophical Becoming: Constructing Moral and Epistemic Subjectivity in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*

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ABSTRACT

*This study examines childhood agency and philosophical becoming in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*, focusing on how children develop moral and epistemic subjectivity through their experiences, relationships, choices, and interpretations of the world around them. Although scholarship on Ogola's novel explores gender, generational change, cultural transformation, and the changing position of women in Kenyan society, childhood receives comparatively limited attention as a philosophical space in which young subjects learn to know, question, judge, choose, and act. The study draws on perspectives from childhood studies and philosophy of becoming and seeks to establish how children exercise agency, how their experiences shape moral reasoning and knowledge, and how familial and communal relationships influence their developing sense of self. A qualitative interpretive design guided the study, with close textual reading used to analyse selected childhood experiences, decisions, interactions, and moments of knowledge-making in the novel. The findings show that childhood is represented not as passive preparation for adulthood but as an active period of questioning, interpretation, moral judgement, and self-discovery. Children draw knowledge from lived experience, observation, relationships, and personal reflection rather than simply receiving it from adults. Their choices and interpretations also demonstrate an emerging capacity to negotiate social expectations and participate meaningfully in their communities. The study concludes that Ogola represents children as developing moral and epistemic subjects whose agency is central to their becoming. The study contributes to Kenyan literary scholarship by positioning childhood as a philosophical and argentic space and by extending the study of subjectivity beyond predominantly adult-centred readings of African literature.*

KEYWORDS

Childhood agency, philosophical becoming, moral subjectivity, epistemic subjectivity, Margaret Ogola, Kenyan literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Childhood is often understood in relation to what it will eventually become: adulthood. Within such a view, children appear as incomplete subjects whose significance lies largely in their preparation for adult life. Childhood studies has challenged this assumption by insisting that children are social actors whose experiences, interpretations and actions matter in the

present (James & Prout, 1997; Prout, 2002). Children may depend on adults and operate within structures they did not create, but this dependence does not eliminate their capacity to interpret experience, negotiate relationships, make choices and act upon their circumstances. Childhood, therefore, can be understood not simply as a stage of preparation but as a significant period of subject formation. This perspective has important implications for literary studies. Representations of children frequently contain forms of questioning, judgement, curiosity, resistance and self-discovery that can disappear when childhood is read mainly as a prelude to adulthood. Agency in this context does not imply complete independence or freedom from social constraint. Rather, it refers to the capacity of young subjects to make meaning of their experiences and to exercise choice within the familial, cultural and institutional conditions that shape their lives. Uprichard (2008) similarly observes that children occupy the positions of both “being” and “becoming”: they are subjects in their own right while simultaneously undergoing processes of change.

Margaret Ogola’s *The River and the Source* offers a particularly productive literary site for examining this relationship between childhood, agency and becoming. Published in 1994, the novel follows several generations of a Luo family across major social and historical transformations, including colonialism, Christianity, education and the emergence of postcolonial Kenyan society. Its multigenerational structure places individual development within a longer history of cultural continuity and change. Yet, although the novel has attracted considerable critical attention, its younger characters have received less sustained consideration as developing subjects in their own right.

Existing scholarship has illuminated important aspects of Ogola’s social and literary vision. Odhiambo (2006), for instance, examines female agency in the novel and demonstrates how its women negotiate and redefine their positions within changing Kenyan society. Duhoe et al. (2022) focus on education and informal learning, highlighting the significance of family instruction, schooling and educational aspirations in shaping successive generations. Such scholarship establishes the importance of agency, education and social transformation in *The River and the Source*. However, these concerns have not been sufficiently brought together to examine childhood as a site where moral judgement, knowledge and selfhood are actively developing. In particular, less attention has been paid to how young characters interpret their experiences, negotiate adult expectations and participate in the production of meaning rather than merely receive it.

This article reads childhood in *The River and the Source* through the interconnected ideas of agency, moral subjectivity, epistemic subjectivity and philosophical becoming. Philosophical becoming is used here not to suggest that Ogola’s young characters engage in formal philosophical reasoning, but to describe the gradual process through which experience becomes a basis for questioning, interpretation, judgement, choice and self-formation. Becoming thus involves more than biological maturation or movement towards adulthood. It concerns the emergence of a subject who is increasingly able to engage with the world, evaluate what is presented to them and act upon that understanding.

The article brings childhood studies into conversation with philosophical perspectives on subject formation. Childhood studies provides the basis for recognising children as social actors, while philosophical approaches to becoming and subjectification help explain how

subjects emerge through encounters with experience, norms, relationships and choices. Biesta's (2020) account of subjectification is particularly useful in this regard because it distinguishes becoming a subject from simply acquiring knowledge or being socialised into existing norms. Read alongside childhood studies, this perspective makes it possible to ask not only what children in Ogola's novel learn, but also how they come to know, judge, question and act. *The River and the Source* represents childhood as an active site of moral and epistemic formation. Young characters inherit values, cultural expectations and forms of knowledge from families and communities, but they do not simply reproduce what they receive. Their experiences generate questions; their relationships test inherited assumptions; and their choices reveal an emerging capacity for moral judgement and independent interpretation. Childhood consequently becomes part of the novel's larger meditation on how individuals are formed within, and sometimes in negotiation with, the worlds they inherit.

The study makes three related contributions to Kenyan literary scholarship. First, it repositions childhood from the margins of Ogola's multigenerational narrative to a significant site of subject formation. Second, it extends discussions of agency beyond the predominantly gendered and adult-centred questions that have characterised much criticism of the novel by examining how young subjects exercise moral and epistemic agency. Third, it brings philosophical becoming into conversation with African childhood studies to show how literary childhood can illuminate the formation of subjects who are neither simply passive recipients of culture nor fully autonomous individuals, but developing persons whose agency is shaped through relationships, experience and social context. In this way, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of childhood in Kenyan literature as a space of knowing, judging, choosing and becoming.

Accordingly, the article pursues three objectives: to examine how the novel constructs young characters as moral agents capable of judgement and responsibility; to investigate how they acquire and exercise epistemic agency through experience, observation, education and questioning; and to analyse how familial, communal and cultural relationships shape their processes of becoming.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study brings together scholarship on childhood agency, philosophical becoming, moral subjectivity, epistemic subjectivity and subjectification to examine how young characters in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* emerge as thinking, judging and acting subjects. The perspectives are complementary.

A. *Childhood Agency and the Child as Social Actor*

The reconceptualization of childhood associated with the new sociology of childhood has significantly altered how children are understood in the social sciences and humanities. Rather than treating childhood principally as a biological or developmental stage, this scholarship recognises children as participants in social life whose experiences are shaped by particular historical, cultural and institutional contexts. James and Prout (1997) were central to this shift, arguing for an understanding of childhood as socially constructed and

for the recognition of children as active social actors. Prout (2002) similarly challenges accounts that position children primarily as passive recipients of adult socialisation. The concept of agency has consequently become central to contemporary childhood studies. However, children's agency cannot simply be equated with adult notions of autonomy or unrestricted individual freedom. It is exercised within structures of age, family, gender, culture, institutions and material circumstance. Children may exercise agency through questioning, persistence, negotiation, learning, refusal, imagination and creative action even when they lack formal authority. Agency is therefore situated, relational and negotiated.

Uprichard (2008) strengthens this position through the distinction between children as both "being" and "becoming." Children are subjects in the present, with their own experiences and capacities, while simultaneously undergoing processes of change. This formulation is particularly useful because it resists two reductive positions: viewing children as complete autonomous subjects in miniature or treating them merely as incomplete adults whose significance lies in the future. Applied to literary studies, this perspective makes it possible to read fictional children as participants in the worlds they inhabit rather than simply as objects of adult narration. Their choices, interpretations and responses may reveal forms of agency that remain invisible when their experiences are interpreted only in terms of maturation.

Although childhood studies has established children as social actors, its broad conceptualisation of agency does not by itself explain how agency develops into particular forms of moral judgement and knowledge-making within a literary narrative. Moreover, scholarship on *The River and the Source* has paid substantial attention to social transformation, gender, education and generational change, but childhood has not received equivalent sustained attention as an independent site of agency and subject formation. This article extends the social-actor perspective into literary analysis by examining how Ogola's young characters exercise agency through interpretation, choice, persistence, negotiation and action. Rather than treating childhood merely as a transitional phase in the novel's multigenerational structure, the article examines what children do, know and decide while they are children. It therefore reads childhood agency as situated within family and community relationships but not wholly determined by them. This provides the foundation for examining how agency contributes to the characters' broader processes of becoming.

B. Philosophical Becoming and Childhood

The concept of becoming shifts attention from fixed identities and completed states to processes of transformation. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) challenge static conceptions of identity by emphasising movement, change and the emergence of new possibilities. From this perspective, the subject is not simply a finished entity but is continually formed through encounters with people, institutions, experiences and ideas. The application of becoming to childhood is particularly significant because conventional developmental models can make childhood appear to be a linear journey towards an already-defined adult identity. Keij (2024), in discussing becoming-child, demonstrates how Delusion thought can complicate conventional assumptions about childhood by drawing attention to movement, possibility and transformation rather than simply chronological development. Uprichard (2008) offers a complementary formulation by understanding children as simultaneously "being" and "becoming." This allows childhood to be understood as a present condition of subjectivity as

well as a process of change. Becoming, therefore, need not mean that children are deficient subjects waiting to become adults. Instead, it draws attention to the ways their identities, understandings and capacities are continuously formed through experience.

For literary analysis, this perspective is useful because characters may change not simply because they grow older but because they encounter situations that force them to reconsider what they know, value or expect. Becoming can consequently be traced through moments of questioning, interpretation, conflict, decision and responsibility.

The literature on becoming provides a strong account of transformation but can remain theoretically abstract when separated from the concrete experiences through which young subjects develop. Conversely, literary criticism of *The River and the Source* tends to discuss development in relation to generational or social transformation without sufficiently examining the everyday experiences through which young characters develop capacities for judgement and knowledge. This article operationalizes philosophical becoming through the concrete experiences of young characters. It examines moments when experience leads to questioning, interpretation, evaluation and choice. Becoming is therefore not treated as an abstract philosophical condition but as something visible in the characters' changing ways of understanding themselves, others and their circumstances. This approach allows the article to connect childhood agency with the formation of moral and epistemic subjectivity.

C. *Moral Subjectivity and the Child as Ethical Agent*

Scholarship on moral subjectivity is concerned with how persons come to recognise values, negotiate competing claims and assume responsibility for their actions. A moral subject is not simply someone who follows rules established by others. Moral agency involves some capacity to interpret circumstances, consider consequences and make meaningful choices. This distinction is particularly important in childhood studies because adult-centred conceptions of morality may assume that children merely absorb moral codes from parents, schools, religious institutions and communities. Such an approach risks overlooking the ways children interpret, question and sometimes negotiate the values they inherit.

The childhood-agency perspective established by James and Prout (1997) provides an important basis for reconsidering children as participants in social and moral life. Uprichard's (2008) understanding of children as both "being" and "becoming" further suggests that children's moral development should not be reduced to movement from moral incompetence towards adult competence. Rather, children participate in moral worlds while their capacities for judgement continue to develop. Within literary representation, this means that children's moral significance can be located not only in whether they conform to social expectations but also in how they respond when expectations conflict with personal experience, relationships or emerging values.

Criticism of *The River and the Source* has extensively examined social values, gender relations, cultural change and generational tensions, but these discussions have not sufficiently foregrounded the child as a moral subject. The question of how young characters interpret responsibility, negotiate competing expectations and make choices has consequently remained underdeveloped. The article addresses this gap by reading selected childhood experiences as moments of moral formation. It examines situations in which

young characters confront expectations, recognise responsibility, weigh alternatives and make choices. Moral subjectivity is therefore treated as developing through experience rather than as something simply transmitted by adults. The analysis demonstrates how Ogola gives young characters a degree of moral participation in the social worlds they inhabit.

D. Epistemic Subjectivity and the Child as Knower

Epistemic subjectivity shifts the question from whether children can act to whether they can know. Conventional assumptions about age often place adults in the position of authoritative knowers and children in the position of learners who receive knowledge. Contemporary scholarship on children's epistemic agency challenges this hierarchy by recognising that children acquire, interpret and sometimes generate knowledge through experience, observation, memory, relationships and participation in social life. Maldonado Castañeda (2024), for example, draws attention to the marginalisation of children's knowledge and the assumptions about age that influence whose knowledge is considered authoritative. Such work is important because it challenges the tendency to dismiss children's perspectives simply because they originate from younger subjects.

The epistemic perspective suggests that knowledge is not confined to formal education. Children may know through lived experience, observation, family histories, cultural practices, religious encounters and interpersonal relationships. Formal schooling remains important, but it constitutes only one of several environments in which knowledge is acquired and interpreted. This distinction is particularly relevant to African literary contexts, where knowledge may be distributed across generations and transmitted through oral traditions, family practices, communal relationships and formal institutions. The child can therefore occupy several epistemic positions at once: learner, observer, and interpreter and, at times, knower.

Duhoe et al. (2022) draw attention to education and informal learning in *The River and the Source*, demonstrating the significance of family instruction, schooling and educational aspiration. Their emphasis establishes education as an important component of the novel's social vision. However, education and epistemic agency are not identical. Knowing involves not only receiving instruction but also interpreting experience, questioning information and using knowledge independently. Existing criticism therefore leaves insufficiently explored the question of how young characters become knowers, particularly through experience outside formal educational institutions. This article extends the discussion from education to epistemic subjectivity. It examines how young characters observe, remember, question, interpret and apply what they encounter. Formal schooling is considered alongside family knowledge, cultural practices, interpersonal experience and personal reflection. In doing so, the article positions young characters not merely as learners being prepared for adult life but as developing epistemic subjects who actively participate in the production and interpretation of meaning.

E. Subjectification, Rationality and Becoming

While agency, moral subjectivity and epistemic subjectivity identify important capacities of the child, they do not fully explain the relational conditions within which those capacities emerge. Biesta's (2020) concept of subjectification provides a useful extension because it

distinguishes becoming a subject from simply acquiring knowledge or being socialised into established norms. Subjectification concerns the emergence of the individual as a subject capable of responding to the world in distinctive ways. This perspective is particularly useful in childhood studies because children do not develop in isolation. Their subjectivities emerge through relationships with parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, peers, religious institutions and wider communities. Agency is therefore relational rather than simply individualistic.

Biesta (2020) argues that education should not be understood only in terms of qualification or socialisation. It can also involve subjectification – the emergence of individuals who can respond to the world rather than simply conform to established expectations. This distinction is important for reading childhood because adult guidance can simultaneously enable and constrain children's development. The relational dimension also complicates an exclusively individualistic conception of agency. A child can exercise agency while remaining deeply embedded in family and community structures. Indeed, relationships may provide the very conditions through which agency becomes possible.

The relational dimension of childhood is visible in criticism of *The River and the Source*, particularly in discussions of family, education, gender and generational continuity. However, these relationships have rarely been brought together with the question of how young characters emerge as moral and epistemic subjects. There remains a need to explain how the social relationships that shape children can simultaneously constitute the conditions within which children interpret, negotiate and transform their circumstances. The article addresses this gap by conceptualising becoming as relational rather than purely individual. It examines how family, community, education, religion and peer relationships shape the possibilities available to young characters while also creating spaces for interpretation, negotiation and choice. The analysis therefore avoids presenting childhood agency as either complete autonomy or simple conformity. Instead, it shows how young subjects become through their encounters with others and through their responses to the worlds those relationships make possible.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design based on close textual reading. This approach was appropriate because the study examines how childhood agency and developing moral and epistemic subjectivity are represented rather than measured. The primary text was Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* (1994). The novel was purposively selected because its multigenerational structure allows childhood and youth to be examined in relation to identity, choice, responsibility and later social participation. Data were generated through repeated close readings of the novel, with particular attention to episodes involving childhood and youth. The analysis focused especially on Akoko, Obura, Owuor Sino/Peter, Awiti and Aoro. Passages were selected where young characters make or express significant choices, question or negotiate social expectations, acquire knowledge through experience, observation, family instruction, religion or formal education, encounter moral conflicts, negotiate relationships with parents, elders, teachers and peers, or demonstrate changes in their understanding of themselves and their circumstances.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrated that childhood in *The River and the Source* is not represented merely as a preparatory stage preceding adult life. Rather, Ogola presents young characters as developing subjects who interpret their circumstances, acquire and evaluate knowledge, negotiate relationships and make choices that shape their individual and social trajectories. The discussion is organised around four interconnected dimensions of this representation: moral agency, epistemic agency, relational agency and philosophical becoming. These dimensions are not treated as separate categories because the characters' moral judgements emerge through what they know, their knowledge develops through relationships, and their choices contribute to continuing processes of becoming.

A. *Childhood as Moral Agency*

Ogola establishes moral agency in childhood through the ways young characters learn to distinguish responsibility from irresponsibility and gradually develop the capacity to make consequential choices. This process is particularly visible in Akoko's upbringing of her children. Her insistence on discipline and productive work is not presented simply as adult control but as an attempt to cultivate dispositions that will enable children to assume responsibility for themselves and others. When Obura becomes idle, Akoko rebukes him: "Only an idle mind can think of such nonsense" and sends him to assist the herdsman. The episode is significant because the lesson is not merely obedience. Work becomes a means through which the child learns responsibility, self-discipline and the relationship between personal conduct and communal wellbeing.

Akoko similarly insists that children should develop intellectual as well as practical capacities. Her belief that a young woman should be "intelligent, fast on her feet and hardworking" is particularly significant in relation to Nyabera and, later, Awiti. The formulation challenges any assumption that girls should be prepared simply for marriage and domestic submission. Within the novel, intelligence and industriousness become qualities through which a young woman can negotiate the demands of her social environment.

Obura provides a more complex example because his moral agency develops through tension between inherited responsibility and personal aspiration. At seventeen, he becomes fascinated by the wider world controlled by the colonial presence and expresses a desire to see it, even though his father expects him to prepare for his future role as chief. His desire is therefore not simply youthful rebellion. It represents an emerging capacity to imagine a life beyond the role assigned to him by birth. The conflict between his aspiration and his inherited obligation illustrates the central problem of moral becoming: the young subject must negotiate what others expect him to become against what he increasingly understands himself to be. The same tension becomes even more pronounced in Peter Owuor Kembo. As a young man, Peter faces an inherited expectation that he will reclaim the chieftaincy of Sakwa, yet he develops a strong desire to enter the priesthood. His difficulty lies not in knowing what he wants but in reconciling that desire with the expectations of his grandmother and the history of his family. His eventual decision to become a priest is consequently an important instance of moral agency because it requires him to assume responsibility for a choice that alters the expected direction of the family lineage.

The significance of Peter's decision is heightened by Akoko's response. She had hoped that he would marry and produce sons to continue the Owuor Kembo line, but she ultimately tells him that she will not stand in his way. Her response transforms the episode from a simple conflict between generations into an encounter in which both generations exercise agency. Peter chooses his vocation, while Akoko chooses to recognise and support his capacity to choose. Moral subjectivity therefore develops relationally: the young subject becomes responsible for his choice, while the adult subject learns to release an inherited expectation.

These episodes support the argument that Ogola does not represent young people as morally empty subjects awaiting adult instruction. They receive moral guidance, but they also interpret that guidance and confront situations in which inherited expectations do not provide a complete answer. Childhood and youth consequently become spaces in which responsibility is learned through action, conflict and choice.

B. Childhood as Epistemic Agency

The novel also constructs young characters as developing knowers. Their knowledge does not come exclusively from formal schooling. It emerges through observation, work, family instruction, cultural experience, religious encounters and personal reflection. This is important because it shifts the child from the position of a passive recipient of adult knowledge to that of an active interpreter of experience. Akoko's parenting provides an early foundation for this epistemic formation. Her insistence that children work, observe and participate in everyday responsibilities means that knowledge is acquired through practice rather than abstract instruction alone. Her teaching about work, discipline and intelligence is embedded in lived experience. The educational process is therefore both informal and experiential, a point also recognised by Duhoe et al. (2022), who identify family instruction and schooling as important dimensions of education in the novel.

Formal education subsequently widens the epistemic possibilities available to the younger generation. Awiti and Peter are educated at the mission, and both use education to pursue distinctive futures. Awiti's academic achievement eventually leads towards teacher training, while Peter's intellectual and religious interests contribute to his decision to enter the priesthood. Education therefore functions in the novel as more than the transmission of information. It enlarges the range of futures that young characters can imagine and makes alternative forms of social participation possible. Awiti is particularly important to this argument. As a girl growing up within a social environment in which educational opportunities for females are restricted, her commitment to schooling represents an epistemic as well as social choice. Her academic success challenges the assumption that intellectual authority belongs primarily to males. Her subsequent development into a teacher further transforms acquired knowledge into a social resource. She does not merely benefit from education; she becomes someone through whom knowledge can circulate to others.

Peter's development provides another dimension of epistemic agency. His decision to pursue religious vocation emerges from sustained intellectual and spiritual engagement rather than from passive obedience. His struggle over whether to accept the chieftaincy or pursue priesthood indicates that he has begun to interpret the possibilities available to him and to

construct a position of his own. His eventual choice demonstrates that knowing oneself can become as important as knowing the external world.

The novel therefore presents education as one of several sites of epistemic becoming. Family instruction, cultural knowledge, observation and formal schooling intersect to produce young subjects capable of interpreting their circumstances. This extends the argument of existing scholarship on education in the novel by showing that the issue is not simply that children receive education, but that education contributes to their emergence as subjects capable of knowing and choosing.

C. *Relational Agency and the Negotiation of Social Expectations*

Although Ogola gives young characters considerable agency, she does not construct that agency as individualistic independence. Their capacity to act develops within relationships with parents, grandparents, teachers, peers and wider communities. Childhood agency is therefore relational: the young subject becomes capable of action through interactions that can simultaneously constrain, guide and enable choice. The relationship between Akoko and the younger generation illustrates this particularly well. Akoko exercises considerable authority as a mother and grandmother, yet her authority is not represented simply as domination. She teaches, disciplines, counsels and, importantly, creates space for younger people to make consequential choices. Her response to Peter's vocation is the clearest example. Although his decision threatens her hope for the continuation of the Owuor Kembo lineage, she ultimately accepts it. The relationship therefore becomes a space in which agency is negotiated rather than imposed.

The relationship between Nyabera and Awiti similarly demonstrates the importance of intergenerational support. Awiti's education is enabled within a family environment that increasingly recognises the value of schooling for girls. The educational trajectory of the younger generation consequently emerges from interaction between inherited values and changing possibilities.

The child or young person does not become independently of the family; rather, the family itself becomes one of the conditions through which new forms of agency become possible. The novel's treatment of gender further complicates relational agency. Girls are expected to negotiate established cultural expectations while acquiring capacities that allow them to participate in changing social worlds. Awiti's educational success illustrates this transition. Her agency does not require her to reject her cultural identity altogether. Instead, she negotiates inherited expectations while using education to create a wider field of possibility for herself.

The same relational principle applies to the boys. Obura's desire to see the wider world emerges in tension with his father's expectation that he will inherit the chieftaincy. Peter's vocation similarly develops in tension with Akoko's expectations for the family line. In both cases, young men's agency is meaningful precisely because it is exercised within relationships of obligation and expectation. Ogola therefore avoids presenting agency as freedom from community. Instead, she shows how the young subject negotiates belonging while developing an increasingly differentiated sense of self.

D. Philosophical Becoming From Experience to Self-Formation

Philosophical becoming provides a useful way of understanding how young characters in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* gradually develop a sense of who they are, what they value, and how they might live within the worlds they inherit. The novel suggests that becoming oneself is neither an automatic consequence of growing older nor a straightforward process of learning to comply with adult expectations. Rather, it involves the gradual negotiation of experience, inherited values, personal aspirations, and the demands of relationships. Young people encounter circumstances they do not always choose, but they are not necessarily defined by those circumstances. What matters is how they interpret their experiences, respond to competing expectations, and make choices that give direction to their lives. This understanding extends the discussion of childhood agency beyond the capacity to act. Agency becomes philosophically significant when action is accompanied by interpretation, reflection, and an emerging sense of responsibility. A young person may initially accept a role assigned by family or community but later begin to question whether that role adequately expresses their abilities, convictions, or aspirations. Such questioning does not automatically amount to rejection of tradition. It may instead signal an attempt to understand what inherited obligations mean and whether they can be fulfilled in a different way. In this respect, becoming involves the gradual movement from receiving an identity to participating in its interpretation.

Obura's experience offers an important entry point into this process. As the anticipated heir to the chieftaincy of Sakwa, he occupies a position already shaped by family history, political expectations, and communal responsibility. His future appears to have been determined before he has had sufficient opportunity to explore what he might wish to become. Yet his fascination with the wider world and his desire to encounter it reveal an imagination that extends beyond the immediate boundaries of his inherited position. He confronts the mother, "Mother, do you know that I am almost seventeen seasons and I have never been anywhere except Yimbo..." and when asked where he would wish to go, he is ready, "Oh anywhere. See the world and what other people do, how different from us they are" (p. 49). His curiosity is therefore more than a passing expression of youthful restlessness. It suggests an emerging awareness that the world contains possibilities beyond those already mapped out for him. The significance of Obura's desire lies in the tension between belonging and possibility. He does not begin from a position outside his culture or family; rather, he imagines a wider life from within the social world that has shaped him. His circumstances invite a question central to philosophical becoming: to what extent should a person's future be determined by the expectations attached to birth? By imagining a life beyond the role of future chief, Obura begins to negotiate the relationship between an identity inherited from others and a future he wishes to explore for himself.

His story also demonstrates that becoming is not necessarily a completed or triumphant process. Obura's life is cut short by war, preventing his aspirations from developing into a fully realised alternative future. This interruption is important because it prevents the analysis from treating self-formation as a guaranteed progression towards personal fulfilment. A young person may develop curiosity, imagine alternatives, and begin to question inherited expectations without being granted the time or circumstances necessary to realise those possibilities. Obura's experience thus exposes the vulnerability of childhood

and youth to historical and political forces beyond individual control. His agency is real, but it is exercised within conditions that can limit its outcomes.

Peter Owuor Kembo provides a more sustained illustration of becoming through the negotiation of inherited identity and personal conviction. As a male descendant of the Owuor Kembo line, Peter is expected to restore the family's political continuity by reclaiming the chieftaincy. This expectation carries more than a personal ambition on behalf of his elders. It represents the weight of lineage, collective memory, and the community's understanding of leadership and succession. The decision, 'Grandmother...I feel that I would like to enter the priesthood. I want to be a pries" (p. 125) consequently places him at the intersection of personal aspiration and inherited responsibility. The importance of his decision becomes clearer when it is understood as a process of self-formation rather than a simple choice of occupation. Peter must confront the possibility that the future imagined for him by his family may not correspond with the future towards which his own experiences and convictions are directing him. His decision requires him to recognise himself as someone whose life cannot be adequately defined by lineage alone. He begins to take responsibility for determining what his identity will mean, even though the decision carries consequences for the family's expectations.

Peter's choice does not, however, erase his cultural and familial identity. He remains a member of the Owuor Kembo family even as he declines the role expected of him. This distinction is essential to the article's argument. Self-formation does not necessarily require a young person to abandon the community from which they emerge. It may involve reinterpreting the obligations and possibilities associated with belonging to that community. Peter's vocation therefore illustrates a form of becoming in which continuity and change coexist. He retains his inherited identity while refusing to accept that it must determine every aspect of his future. Akoko's eventual response to Peter's decision adds a further dimension to this process: "You have concluded quite wrongly that I will stand in you way. It is true that I have had hopes that you might one day sit in the chief's stool...; but things have changed and people are turning to different things. I had also hoped that you would marry...to ensure the continuity of the house of Owuor Kembo; but no I will not stand in your way" (p. 126). This encounter reveals that self-formation is not solely an individual achievement. It also depends, in part, on whether relationships allow the developing person room to exercise judgement and take responsibility. Peter asserts his capacity to choose, while Akoko confronts the need to reconsider an expectation rooted in her understanding of family continuity. Both are involved in a process of change, although their positions and responsibilities differ.

Awiti's educational development reveals another dimension of philosophical becoming: the expansion of self-understanding through learning. Her movement towards teacher training is significant not simply because education improves her prospects, but because it enlarges her understanding of what she can do and the roles she can occupy in society. In a social environment shaped by gendered expectations, education provides her with opportunities to develop capacities that might otherwise remain unrecognised or restricted. As she progresses, she acquires more than academic knowledge. She gains a wider sense of her possibilities and a greater capacity to participate in the social world (p. 135). Awiti's development also illustrates why becoming should not be reduced to the acquisition of an adult status. The significance of her education lies in the changing relationship between

knowledge and self-understanding. As she learns, she becomes increasingly able to imagine a future beyond the limitations that gender and established social expectations might impose. Her movement towards teaching is especially important because it allows her to transform what she has acquired into a resource for others. Knowledge becomes part of her identity and a means through which she can participate in the development of her community.

Her trajectory further complicates the assumption that agency must be demonstrated through open confrontation with authority. Awiti's educational development shows that a young person may negotiate restrictive expectations through persistence, achievement, and the gradual creation of new possibilities. Her agency is expressed not only in what she resists but also in what she learns, pursues, and becomes capable of contributing. In this sense, education supports both personal formation and social participation. It enables her to enlarge her own possibilities while potentially widening those available to others.

Aoro offers a related perspective on the relationship between childhood dispositions and later development. His description as "swift and bright; confident and curious" associates him with an active interest in the world around him. Curiosity is particularly significant because it represents a disposition towards discovery rather than passive acceptance. A curious child does not necessarily challenge every established belief, but the desire to explore, ask questions, and encounter unfamiliar experiences creates opportunities for learning and changing one's understanding. Within the novel's multigenerational structure, Aoro's childhood characteristics acquire significance beyond the immediate moment in which they are presented. They invite the reader to consider how early dispositions may contribute to later capacities and forms of social participation. However, these characteristics should not be treated as a predetermined explanation of his future. Rather, they suggest that becoming begins in the everyday experiences through which children encounter their surroundings, develop interests, and learn to respond to the people and circumstances around them.

The novel's multigenerational structure deepens this argument by placing individual development within a longer history of continuity and change. The lives of younger characters unfold within the accumulated experiences, values, struggles, and aspirations of earlier generations. They inherit worlds they did not create, but they do not simply reproduce them. Their experiences may reinforce some inherited values while opening possibilities for others to be reinterpreted. The river metaphor that informs the novel reinforces this relationship between continuity and transformation. Individual lives belong to a larger movement, yet each generation encounters circumstances that require its members to respond in their own ways. This perspective also clarifies the distinction between philosophical becoming and ordinary maturation. Growing older marks the passage of time, but it does not necessarily explain how a person comes to question an expectation, recognise a responsibility, or develop a conviction. Becoming draws attention to the experiences and decisions through which such changes occur. It allows childhood and youth to be examined as periods in which the self is actively formed rather than merely prepared for a future adult identity. The young person is already participating in this process, even when circumstances prevent the full realisation of emerging possibilities. The analysis therefore establishes that self-formation in *The River and the Source* is neither wholly individual nor entirely determined by family and community. It takes place through

encounters with inherited expectations, education, relationships, personal aspirations, and circumstances beyond individual control.

E. Childhood, Moral and Epistemic Subjectivity

The preceding findings bring into focus a central argument of this study: childhood in *The River and the Source* is not merely a period during which individuals acquire the knowledge and values required for adult life. It is also a period in which they participate in the formation of their own moral and epistemic subjectivities. Ogola's young characters encounter expectations, acquire knowledge, interpret experiences, make choices, and begin to recognise themselves as participants in the social worlds they inhabit. Their significance therefore lies not only in what they may eventually become, but also in their capacity to think, judge, and act in the present.

Moral subjectivity concerns the development of a person's capacity to recognise ethical questions, evaluate competing expectations, and assume responsibility for choices. It involves more than knowing the difference between what adults consider right and wrong. A person becomes a moral subject when they begin to engage with the reasons, obligations, and consequences involved in deciding how to act. From this perspective, the young characters in Ogola's novel are not simply recipients of a moral code established by their elders. They encounter situations in which inherited expectations must be considered alongside personal convictions, relationships, and the possibilities available to them. Peter's decision to enter the priesthood provides a particularly revealing example. His dilemma involves competing claims on his future: the expectation that he will restore the family's political lineage and his own desire to pursue a religious vocation.

The conflict cannot be resolved simply by identifying one expectation as important and the other as irrelevant. Both emerge from meaningful contexts, and Peter must determine how to respond to them. His eventual decision demonstrates an emerging capacity to take responsibility for the direction of his life rather than allow his future to be settled entirely by inherited obligations.

The moral significance of Peter's choice lies in the responsibility involved in making it. Agency does not mean that a person can disregard every obligation to others, nor does it mean that personal preference automatically takes precedence over communal expectations. Rather, moral agency requires the capacity to consider such obligations, recognise their competing demands, and make a decision for which one is prepared to accept responsibility. Peter's choice is significant because it involves precisely this negotiation. He does not simply escape the demands of his family. He must confront the implications of choosing a future different from the one anticipated for him. Akoko's response also demonstrates that moral subjectivity is not the exclusive property of the young. Her willingness to accept Peter's decision requires her to reconsider what loyalty to the family means. Although she has a legitimate concern for the continuation of the lineage, she comes to recognise that this concern cannot entirely determine another person's future. Her response suggests that ethical responsibility may sometimes involve revising an expectation one has long considered necessary. The episode consequently presents moral judgement as a relational process through which both younger and older persons may reconsider how their responsibilities should be understood.

Awiti's educational development similarly expands the understanding of moral agency. Her pursuit of education takes place within a social context in which gender influences the opportunities available to young people. By developing her intellectual capacities and moving towards a teaching career, she participates in a process that extends beyond individual advancement. Her education creates the possibility of contributing to others through the knowledge she acquires. Her trajectory therefore connects personal development with social responsibility, demonstrating that agency can be expressed through the constructive use of one's capacities rather than through resistance alone.

These examples suggest that moral subjectivity in the novel is formed through encounters with responsibility, difference, expectation, and choice. Young people learn from adults and remain accountable to relationships, but they also participate in deciding how inherited values should guide their actions. Their moral development is neither a simple rejection of established norms nor their unquestioning reproduction. It involves the gradual capacity to interpret those norms in particular circumstances and to respond with an increasing sense of responsibility.

Epistemic subjectivity adds another essential dimension to this argument by directing attention to the child as a knower. If moral subjectivity concerns how young people judge and act, epistemic subjectivity concerns how they come to know, interpret, and make sense of their worlds. The distinction matters because the capacity to act meaningfully depends, in part, on how a person understands the circumstances in which action becomes necessary. A young person who can interpret experience, recognise alternatives, and reflect on what has been learned is not merely receiving knowledge from others. That person is participating in the production of understanding. Ogola's representation of learning provides a basis for this interpretation. Knowledge in the novel emerges through family instruction, practical experience, observation, cultural participation, formal education, and religious engagement. These forms of learning do not perform identical functions, nor should they be treated as interchangeable. Nevertheless, their coexistence demonstrates that the development of knowledge cannot be confined to the classroom. Children learn through what they do, what they observe, what others teach them, and how they interpret the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Akoko's approach to upbringing illustrates the importance of experiential learning. Her insistence on discipline, productive work, and intelligence places learning within the activities and responsibilities of everyday life. The children are expected not merely to hear instructions but to participate in the practices through which particular values and capacities are cultivated. In this sense, knowledge is connected to action. Practical experience offers opportunities to develop an understanding of responsibility, while observation and participation help young people interpret the social expectations surrounding them. This form of learning is significant because it challenges the assumption that adults are the only authoritative sources of knowledge. Adults may possess experience and occupy positions of authority, but children's own participation in everyday life also gives them opportunities to acquire forms of understanding. The knowledge developed through these experiences may be incomplete, and young people may need guidance, but neither circumstance makes their perspectives meaningless. To recognise children as epistemic subjects is not to claim that they know everything or that adult knowledge is unnecessary. It is to acknowledge that their knowledge-making capacities deserve serious consideration.

Formal education broadens these possibilities further. Awiti's academic development illustrates how schooling can extend a young person's intellectual resources and enlarge the range of futures they can imagine. Her movement towards teacher training demonstrates that knowledge does not remain confined to the individual who acquires it. Through teaching, what she has learned can become available to others. Her development therefore reveals a relationship between epistemic agency and social participation – the young person becomes a knower who can also contribute to the knowledge and development of a wider community. Peter's educational and religious experiences likewise contribute to his understanding of the possibilities available to him. His eventual decision to pursue priesthood suggests that learning can influence not only what a person knows about the external world but also how that person understands the self.

The choice reflects an emerging interpretation of vocation and identity that differs from the future anticipated by his family. Education and religious engagement thus become part of a wider process through which he considers what kind of life he might lead. Knowledge matters here not simply because it supplies information, but because it opens possibilities for reflection and choice. Obura's curiosity offers a further, though different, illustration of epistemic agency. His desire to see the wider world indicates an awareness that knowledge of one's immediate surroundings need not exhaust one's understanding of what is possible. Curiosity becomes an impulse towards encounter and discovery. Although his life does not allow this impulse to develop into a fully realised future, the desire itself reveals an active orientation towards knowledge. Obura is not content simply to inhabit the world as it has been explained to him; he wishes to encounter more of it for himself.

Taken together, these examples establish that epistemic subjectivity involves more than the possession of information. It includes the capacity to observe, question, interpret, connect experiences, and use what one learns to make sense of one's circumstances. The young characters remain learners, but they are not only learners. They also interpret what they encounter and, in doing so, participate in the formation of their own understanding. This distinction extends the discussion of education in *The River and the Source* by shifting attention from the opportunities education provides to the ways young people actively engage with knowledge. The relationship between moral and epistemic subjectivity is especially important. Knowing and judging are not identical activities, but they frequently inform one another. A person may possess information without knowing how to act responsibly, just as a moral decision may be weakened by an inadequate understanding of the circumstances involved. In Ogola's novel, the formation of the young subject emerges through the interaction of these capacities. Experience supplies material for reflection; knowledge helps the individual interpret circumstances; and moral judgement informs the choices through which that understanding is put into practice.

Peter's vocational decision illustrates this connection most clearly. His choice requires an understanding of the expectations surrounding his lineage, an emerging interpretation of his religious vocation, and a judgement about the future he is prepared to pursue. His epistemic development contributes to his capacity to make a consequential decision, while the decision itself gives practical expression to his developing understanding. Awiti's educational trajectory offers a related example: the knowledge she acquires enlarges her possibilities, while her pursuit of education demonstrates a willingness to act upon those

possibilities. Obura's curiosity, although interrupted by his early death, reveals how the desire to know can become part of an emerging sense of self.

These examples also invite consideration of the relationship between children's knowledge and adult authority. In families and communities, adults often occupy positions from which they teach, guide, discipline, and make decisions for younger people. Such authority can be necessary and enabling, but it can also restrict the opportunities children have to express their understanding or exercise judgement. Ogola's novel reveals a more complex relationship between generations. Akoko's authority helps cultivate capacities in the younger generation, yet her eventual response to Peter's vocation also demonstrates the importance of recognising that guidance cannot entirely substitute for a young person's own judgement. The issue, therefore, is not whether adults should guide children or whether children should be left to determine every aspect of their lives independently.

Such a choice would oversimplify the relational world represented in the novel. The more significant question is whether relationships create opportunities for young people to develop their capacities, interpret what they learn, and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their futures. Akoko's relationship with Peter suggests that guidance becomes more enabling when it recognises the developing person's capacity to make choices. In this respect, the recognition of childhood agency does not require the elimination of adult responsibility; it requires a more thoughtful understanding of how responsibility and authority should operate between generations. The Luo familial and communal context of the novel is central to this interpretation. The young characters develop within relationships that attach importance to lineage, family continuity, social responsibility, and communal belonging. These relationships shape the possibilities available to them and influence the expectations against which their decisions are made. Their agency should therefore not be understood through an exclusively individualistic model in which freedom means separation from community. For Peter, the question is how to pursue a vocation that differs from the family's expectations while remaining part of that family. For Awiti, education enlarges her possibilities within a changing social environment. For Obura, curiosity emerges within a world where political inheritance has already assigned him an anticipated future.

Such examples demonstrate that rationality and agency are not necessarily opposing forces. Relationships can restrict a young person's choices, but they can also provide the knowledge, support, values, and opportunities through which agency develops. Family instruction may cultivate practical understanding; education may open new possibilities; and an elder's willingness to reconsider an expectation may enable a younger person to pursue a different future. Agency is consequently neither unrestricted individual freedom nor mere conformity to communal authority. It develops through the ways young people negotiate the relationships and circumstances that constitute their lives. This relational understanding also helps explain the connection between childhood subjectivity and philosophical becoming. The young person becomes a moral and epistemic subject through encounters that require interpretation, judgement, and response. The process is ongoing because experiences change, relationships evolve, and new circumstances create questions that earlier knowledge may not fully resolve. Becoming is therefore not a final destination at which the individual acquires a complete and unchanging identity. It is a continuing process through which the person develops the capacity to respond to the world with increasing understanding and responsibility.

The significance of Ogola's multigenerational narrative lies in its ability to situate this process within a larger history of inheritance and transformation. Each generation receives a world shaped by earlier lives, yet its members encounter new circumstances and possibilities. The younger characters are therefore not simply the passive recipients of a completed cultural inheritance. Their choices and developing understandings participate in the continuing interpretation of that inheritance. The novel presents social continuity as something sustained through human relationships and decisions, rather than as the unchanged repetition of the past.

The findings consequently challenge two assumptions about childhood. The first is that children matter primarily because of the adults they will eventually become. The second is that recognising childhood agency requires treating children as entirely autonomous individuals who should be separated analytically from their families and communities. Ogola's representation supports neither position. Her young characters possess present capacities for knowing, judging, and acting, but those capacities develop within relationships and circumstances that they do not fully control. Their subjectivity is real without being complete, and their agency is meaningful without being unrestricted.

This distinction is central to understanding childhood as both a present human condition and a process of becoming. The young person is already someone whose experiences and interpretations matter, even while their understanding and capacities continue to develop. Childhood should therefore not be dismissed as a period of epistemic deficiency or moral incompleteness. Nor should the child's developing capacities be exaggerated into an assumption of full independence. The more adequate position is to recognise children as developing subjects whose knowledge, judgement, and agency deserve attention in their own right.

Ultimately, *The River and the Source* presents childhood as a significant site of moral and epistemic formation. Through Obura's curiosity, Peter's vocational choice, Awiti's educational development, and the relational guidance represented through Akoko, the novel shows how young people encounter inherited expectations, acquire knowledge, interpret experience, and begin to shape their own futures. Their development involves both the opportunities and the constraints of belonging to families and communities. What emerges is a conception of childhood in which becoming oneself does not mean escaping every inherited relationship, but learning to understand, negotiate, and respond to the world those relationships make possible.

The central contribution of this analysis is therefore to bring childhood agency, philosophical becoming, moral judgement, and knowledge-making into a single interpretive framework. It demonstrates that the child in Ogola's novel is not merely the object of adult instruction or the future bearer of communal values. The child is already a participant in the processes through which knowledge is interpreted, values are negotiated, and identities take shape. Childhood becomes philosophically significant precisely because it is a time when individuals are already engaged in the work of understanding the world and deciding how they might live within it.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined childhood agency and philosophical becoming in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*, with particular attention to moral and epistemic subjectivity. The analysis showed that childhood in the novel is not presented merely as a preparatory stage leading towards adulthood. It is a formative space in which young characters develop capacities to interpret experience, acquire knowledge, make judgements and choose courses of action.

Akoko's early assertiveness establishes an important foundation for the development of a strong sense of self. Obura's curiosity demonstrates the epistemic dimension of the desire to encounter a world beyond immediate experience. Peter's vocational choice illustrates the moral complexity of negotiating personal conviction and inherited responsibility. Awiti's educational development shows how knowledge can enlarge the possibilities available to a young woman.

The study also established that Ogola's conception of agency is fundamentally relational. Children do not become subjects by withdrawing from family and community. Their agency develops through relationships in which they receive knowledge, encounter expectations, negotiate authority and discover possibilities.

Philosophical becoming therefore provides a useful way of understanding the movement between inheritance and transformation in the novel. The child is neither simply an incomplete adult nor an entirely autonomous subject. The child is already a subject while simultaneously undergoing change.

The study consequently argues that childhood deserves greater attention in African literary criticism as a philosophical site of becoming. Such a perspective makes visible forms of moral reasoning, experiential knowledge and epistemic agency that adult-centred readings may overlook. In *The River and the Source*, the child is not merely an adult in waiting. The child is already engaged in the continuing work of becoming a self.

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