

## Introduction

The concept of polyphony drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin's idea is discussed as a crucial element in literature; representing the multiplicity of voices that interact while maintaining autonomy. The paper applies this concept to the anthology *Songs of Almajiri, An Anthology of poems on Almajirci*, which presents a rich mosaic of distinct voices and perspectives that dynamically interact. *Songs* probes into the harsh realities of stigmatization, social rejection, and the ramifications of the *Al-Majiri* (s) system in Northern Nigeria, unravelling the intricate tapestry of poverty woven into the narratives. Additionally, the paper explores the pivotal role of language in conveying these profound themes, acting as a conduit for the expression of the *Al-Majiri* experiences. *Songs* not only serves as a showcase of manifold voices thriving within the *Al-Majiri* community but also extends an invitation to readers- a call to engage, empathize and reflect upon the intricate and often overlooked complexities of these marginalized group.

## Polyphony

Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* discovers polyphony; a world of autonomous subjects where character's words about themselves and their worlds is as fully weighted as the author's word; they are neither subordinated, nor do they serve as the author's mouthpiece, they possess extraordinary independence in the structure of the work (89). Dostoevsky's creation of a fundamentally new novelistic genre is his rejection of the monologic form of the traditional novel in which character's voices, viewpoints, philosophies, and the diversity of their social worlds are all objects of an encompassing authorial knowledge and thus subordinated to a unified, monologic artistic design where the authorial word is always the final word (Morris 88). Dostoevsky rejects this authorial position, 'In his works a hero appears whose voice is constructed exactly like the voice of the author himself... it sounds as if it were alongside the author's word (Morris 88),' "...and in a special way combines both with it and with the full equally valid voices of other characters" (Emerson 89). Authorial consciousness

is brought on to the same plane as that of the heroes and interacts with them dialogically as autonomous subjects not as objectified images held within the author's vision, Dostoevsky's new novelistic form is a design for discourse; 'a great dialogue of interacting voices', a polyphony according to Bakhtin (Morris 89). Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons* (1871), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866) are exemplary polyphonic texts. In *Demons*, three distinct narrative voices evolve simultaneously and consider the abstract theme from different perspectives (Lachman 39). Kocaoglu's (2020) observes that Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* unites criminal/thinker Raskolnikov and the righteous/prostitute Sonya. However, they are not presented as objects of Dostoevsky's artistic vision but rather, as authors of their own worldviews.

Polyphony as described by Bakhtin is, 'A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices... a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event' (6). In much simpler terms, polyphony will refer to a multiplicity of voices which remain distinct, never merging, never being silenced by a more powerful majority, always interacting in a play or plurality of consciousness with one another (Shields 39). In Helin's (2014) opinion, the polyphonic novel is not only a multi-voiced text but a literary device that is inconclusive and emergent, it demands continuation and no final word, it changes the relationship between the writer and those written about, as well as the relationship between the text and the reader. Letiche's emphasis in "Polyphony and its Other" (261-375) is that polyphony demands both relationship and difference, it requires both plurality and singularity; multiple voices which remain distinct but nonetheless form the unity of an event. This means that polyphony demands more voices, perspectives, and subject positions in a single interaction; Letiche agrees that polyphony cannot bear one authorial voice, truth, strategy, and point of view, but argues that it also cannot bear voices or perspectives that are incommensurable, do not interact, cannot relate

to one another, or exert no influence on one another. In other words, for polyphony to thrive, unity and plurality must correlate. Many users of polyphony according to Letiche respect only one of these two dimensions. We hope to see how these two dimensions correlate in *Songs*. I will look at *Songs* in relation to the different voices that abound, the form, structure, narrators, images, and poetic devices that enable the collection of poems count more as polyphony than in single authored narratives.

### **Polyphony in *Songs of Al-Majiri***

*Songs* is an anthology of poems on *Al-Majirci* (v). The collection has precisely sixty-two (62) poems created by multiple melodic voices which means a diversity of tone, mood, points of view and voices, providing different perspectives of truth surrounding what Letiche (262) calls “the unity of an event”; the *Al-Majiri* and his ordeals. The poems appear as an interaction of distinct voices borne of diverse preoccupations ranging from stigmatisation, social rejection, search for identity, disillusionment, loneliness, plea, grotesque images, irony, torture, poverty, hope, longing and much more. Some address the origins, challenges, and consequences while others proffer solutions to the problematic *Al-Majiri* education system. This indicates that no single voice can convey the layer and complexity of the subject matter but voices “receiving and giving energy to one another”, voices that would offer the reader varieties of tastes, smells, sights, sounds, and emotions enveloped in this parable and advocacy of the *Al-Majiri*. Voices which are not of *Al-Majiri* origin. An example of literary ventriloquism defined by Briere (1200-1212) as the strategy used by a writer to project the exotic voice of the other within their text; it creates the illusion that the ‘Other’ is speaking while they actually remain voiceless and possess no power to control what is being said in their names. The poets in *Songs* borrow from the *Al-Majirai* (pl) whose voices are unheard to address parents, the society, religious and political authorities and to denounce the conditions under which the *Al-Majirai* strive. They adopt ventriloquism to illustrate some of the unsettling experiences the *Al-Majirai* face.

However, the *Al-Majiri* is often given a voice that is submissive or helpless, a voice that questions the rationale behind the *Al-Majiri* education system and criticises those in authority which may not be the case in reality. Ibrahim in the poem “Almajiri” (*Songs* 66) has this to say in the poets’ defence:

They have no choice as they have no voice, it is time we  
converge to raise that voice,  
A voice so loud they should hear us speak, to speak words so  
clear and meek  
We may think this isn’t our place, but it’s definitely not for a  
single child to face,  
... better a congress

The paper’s choice of the anthology is based on the presence of these varied voices coming together under an umbrella to focus on a single problem, albeit from contradictory positions. The multiple discourses form a multi-voicedness perspective, to create what Bakhtin calls polyphony. In the preface to the anthology, the editors declare that the motivation for the collection arose from the thought that there may be other persons sharing the same concerns as theirs on the *Al-Majiri*. This informs the idea of ‘unity of concerns,’ leading to an anthology of ‘unity in plurality’. Cutting across ethnic, religious, and cultural barriers, the anthology was birthed, to drive home the point that humanity is the watchword, and the presence of polyphony is more genuinely plural.

### **On Language**

In the aspect of langue and parole, the poems speak what Bakhtin phrases as “double voiced” discourse; one utterance, two consciousness (102) and, Du Bois calls “two-ness” or “double-consciousness”, with regards to the African American race and ethnic relations. Du Bois asserts, “... such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals...” (155-6). Literally, “double words” speak both the language of the dominant culture and the language of the subordinate culture as well, and like the signifying monkey, it can use words with greater flexibility (Klages 150- 1).

In his article "The Blackness of Blackness": A Critique of Sign and the Signifying Monkey" (1983), Gates traces the origins of the signifying monkey which exists in the discourse of mythology as a vehicle of narration, to the nineteenth century era of slavery. According to Gates, the trickster figure known as *Èṣù Èlégbára* in Nigerian Yoruba mythology, *Légbá* among the Son in Dahomey, *Exu* in Brazil, *Echu- -Eleguá* in Cuba, *Papa Legba* in Haiti, and *Papa La Bas* in the US are the signifying monkeys in black mythology. All avatars of *Esu* are messengers of the god of divine linguist, the keeper of *àṣẹ* (logos); *Esu* is the protector of crossroads, the master of form and the stylus, the phallic god of procreation and fecundity, and the master of the mystic barrier separating the worlds of the divine and the mundane (Gates 687).

The signifying monkey is described by Gates as "He who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever trooping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language... Signifying is a trope that subsumes other rhetorical tropes including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis" (685-6). Abrahams 51-2, attaches various meanings to signifying in black discourse: "...The trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also, it can denote speaking with hands and eyes and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures." To sum it up, anthropologists describe the signifying monkey as "he who wreaks havoc upon the signified." I shall now turn to the poems to explore these discourses in relation to unity and plurality. However, before doing so, I will provide a brief background on the *Al-Majiri* context.

### ***Al-Majiri Scholar Context***

Traced by Badirudeen and Dauda (2020), the word *Al-Majiri* formed its root from the Arabic word *Al- Muhajir* which denotes an ‘emigrant’. The word is a historical statement in Islam connected to the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad’s (peace be upon him) migration from Mecca to Madinah-Munawwarah to escape persecution by pagans. Those companions who migrated with the Prophet (pbuh) were called *Al-Muhajirun*. However, in Northern Nigerian context, the word *Al- Muhajir* connotes a beggar (both emigrant and native beggars) as well as a boy child who leaves home to distance places within the northern region in search of Qur’anic education (the religious text of Islam). The dominant language used in this region is Hausa and to suit the native tongue, *Al-Muhajir* is pronounced as *Al-Majiri*. In Hoechner’s (67-8) report, assuming a sense of pride and self-worth, the *Al-Majiri* scholar expressed that the syllable ‘al’ for *al-majiri* stands for Allah (God), ‘ma’ was short for Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and ‘jir’ for angel Jibril. This may sound logical but it’s far-fetched from the truth.

The poem “In the Beginning” gives an insight into the genesis of *Al-Majirci* which is a Qur’anic and historical allusion to Allah’s decree and Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) Hadith (sayings) on seeking and acquiring knowledge as a duty and obligation of every Muslim and which seems to be the foundation of *Al-Majiri* education system. The spiritual journey of *Al-Majirci* begins with the creation of objects of learning in the heavens as pointed out in the poem: “In the beginning were- The word, the pen and the slate” (*Songs 37*).

As narrated by Ubada bin As-Samit: The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), mentioned the first creation of Allah as the pen. Allah commanded it to, “Write.” It asked, “What should I write, my Lord?” Allah commanded, “Write what was decreed about everything till the last hour comes” (*Kitab Al-Sunnah* 4700). In addition, when the Qur’an was revealed, the first word or rather, its first verse was “Iqr’a” translated as, “Read”. The verses further command:

Read! In the Name of your Lord who created (all that exists).  
He has created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood).

Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous.  
Who has taught (the writing) by the pen.  
He has taught man that which he knew not (Qur'an 96: 1-5: Al- Hilali & Khan 842).

The word "Read" according to the interpretation of many Islamic scholars connotes reading, writing, study, research, and pursuit of knowledge in the sciences, arts, humanities, and all other branches (Rufai 3). The poem emphasises this:

The search should be on  
For anything unknown-  
Wisdom, faith, health and all  
From the cradle till the last is breath (*Songs* 37)

There are seven hundred and fifty verses in the Qur'an commanding humankind to study the universe. Islamic scholars unanimously agree that the verses are a universal directive to all of humankind to seek all kinds of lawful knowledge from birth until death, literally from infancy to old age. The reward: "Allah will exalt in degree those of you who believe, and those who have been granted knowledge. And Allah is well acquainted with what you do" (Qur'an, 58:11: Al- Hilali & Khan 747). The Prophet (pbuh) adds: "Whoever takes a path in search of knowledge, Allah will make him walk on one of the paths to Paradise. Indeed, the angels will lower their wings with great pleasure for the one who seeks knowledge," (Ramlan 2021).

There was the decree to roam  
Not in search of forsaken morsel  
In sagged shirts Over tattered shorts  
From homes, hostels and brothels  
From the rich, the poor and the bad (*Songs* 37)

These lines describe the *Al-Majiri* child both in tattered appearance and in their actions of roaming the streets and homes of strangers, their encounter with the angelic and the devilish souls while begging in the name of seeking knowledge decreed in faraway lands as commanded by the Prophet (pbuh). It is evident that the Mallams and parents of these children misinterpret the Prophet (pbuh). He did not decree to roam in search of provision but:

Roam it is decreed  
From *Sin* in the polar East  
To the far flung towns

Deep in the Western pole (*Songs* 37)

Roam, the Prophet (pbuh) has decreed, in search of knowledge not only of the Qur'an but also of worldly affairs; medicine and science in the ancient city of China (*Sin*) and of technology in Europe (Western pole). But as we will see in the voices in *Songs*, the *Al-Majiri*, not only roams in search of scholarship but also roams in pursuit of beggarship.

### ***Al-Majiri* Begging**

There have been significant discussions regarding the reasons why the boy child is sent to the *Al-Majiri* school despite inherent obstacles. According to Nigeria Research Network (NRN, 2013), the *Al-Majiri* enrolment could be attributed to high level of poverty, for, most *Al-Majirai* fall under the category of extremely poor families. Pointers to this are statistics drawn by Bukoye (325) and Olawale (1) showing Northern Nigeria having the largest percentage of poverty rate and under development which could measure based on the level of education, the welfare status of indigenes and the effect of insecurity and ethno-religious violence which leads to destruction of family system and basic infrastructural amenities. In addition, poverty contributes to maternal mortality rates and high divorce; children from disbanded families are more likely to become *Al-Majirai* than those from stable households, it also limits educational options (NRN, 2013).

Further, UNESCO's 2020 model estimate indicates Nigeria having 19.7 million children out of formal education. Similarly, in 2023, UNICEF estimates the figure at 18.5 million. The International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) in 2023 rounds off the number at 20 million. However, recently, the Executive Secretary of the National Commission of the *Al-Majiri* and Out-of-School Children's Education disclosed an alarming number of 50 million out of formal school children, of which 30 million are enrolled in the *Al-Majiri* system (Daily Trust 2024). NRN (2013) and Hoechner (2018) observe that poor households in Northern Nigeria have few alternative educational choices, as the modern schools available to them tend



to be both poor in quality and demand expenditure for learning materials, hence, they opt for *Al-Majiri* schools by donating grains and money for teachers upon enrolment and at graduation. In Hoechner's opinion, if the system does not exist, its students would probably be worse off.

A significant number of *Al-Majiri* voices in *Songs* attribute begging to both poverty and the high birth rates prevalent in the Northern region of Nigeria. In "It hurts me so much!" (*Songs* 33) and "Change from Below" (*Songs* 86), poverty is a major factor, hence, "Pretending seeking knowledge but to survive" (*Songs* 33). Though welcoming a new birth is often considered a blessing to families, "... the unsavoury irrational rate of birth" (*Songs* 5), has ironically become a "labyrinth," a complicated path leading to an unpromised future especially to the children in Northern Nigeria. The United Nations in the *World Population Prospect* projects the population of Nigeria in 2023 at 223,804,632 while in 2024 the *World Population Review* (live) projects the number at 233,668,528. The UN ascertains that the major contributors to Nigeria's population growth are early marriages, high fertility rates and lack of access to family planning and, the Northern region of Nigeria, among the more than three hundred ethnic groups accounts for thirty percent of these population. Population should strengthen manpower but here the picture appears bleak. "The Shameless Mother" (60), "Grave of Talent" (62) and "Almajiri" (81) polyphonic voices rebuke Northern Nigeria's complicity, for joking with her offspring, making mockery of motherhood, and turning future generations into beggars. One of the voices urges Northern Nigeria to learn how to protect her children from mother duckling, for even animals do not abandon their offspring- "The story still unheard in the wilderness" (45).

From another perspective, Ogunkan (129) opines that the *Al-Majiri* child's culture of begging stems from the family's neglect of parental responsibility; often due to the father's decision, after divorcing the mother and remarrying another wife or otherwise (International

Centre for Investigative Research 2016). This view is echoed by Orbuma in the five-stanza quintet complemented by a sestain “Wandering Scholar”:

Oh wandering scholar  
Chased and shut out  
From the loins from which you came forth,  
Into the abysmal darkness of uncertainty  
Without a destination in mind (*Songs* 50)

For some other parents, it is their belief as a religious duty to ensure their wards study the Qur’an under a certain degree of hardship to learn respect and endurance (NRN, 2013). Through vivid imagery and simile, Imran blames father’s ideology in the villanelle “Al-Majiri”:

My father sticks to feign fact;  
That I learn the Quran outdoors  
I am married to the roads like a kid clinging to its mother (*Songs* 68).

Father represents deluded or wilfully ignorant parents and Qur’anic teachers who rationalize or justify harmful practices under the guise of traditional or religious duty. This is metaphorically re-echoed in the 18-line poem “A System of Woe”:

Woe to the system of catalyst  
On whose mind are cast shadows of ignorance  
For his child’s future...  
Whose actions fulfil the prophesy of tragedy  
The tragedy that God is not to be blamed (*Songs* 46).

Borrowing from the Biblical phrase- “daily bread,” Yandoki’s voice further rebukes both the parents and the Mallams for neglecting the child’s physical well-being, which is essential for effective learning, and in the process tarnishing the reputation of the Islam, in the free verse “Almajirci”:

Don’t condemn the system  
But the mother and father  
That willingly send their child on a mission to read  
With no provision for his daily bread.  
Don’t condemn the system  
but the imam that fails to reject parental responsibility  
claiming unattainable abilities  
end up graduating liabilities

and jeopardising Islamic dignity (*Songs* 20)

The lack of support can lead to failure, frustration and worse, exploitation.

Dismiss to an uncertain life by his parents, his Mallam transforms him into a *mabaraci* (beggar) (Ogunkan 129). Many a Mallam ensure that the *Al-Majiri* offers them part of the proceeds from begging as ‘a mark of submissiveness’ (ICIR 2016). The Mallams turn child begging into a primary source of income (Ogunkan 2011, Onitada 2015). The polyphonic voices in *Songs* argue that begging persists in the *Al-Majiri* system due to a percentage of Mallams commodifying the *Al-Majirai*:

The good food he gets  
Is only fit for the Malam  
And his family who must feed  
From the sweat of the innocent (*Songs* 39)

Finally, when I get food  
Even when the pangs of hunger bite deep  
How dare I eat that delicious food?  
It is for the Malam to decide (*Songs* 40)

Scavengers we are  
Many mouths to feed  
Malam, wives and children  
Almajirai we are! (*Songs* 48)

In yet another voice, *Al-Majirci* serves as a punishment to the child’s supposed “naughtiness”:

For my father says  
The devil has triumphed over his family  
My punishment is pronounced  
A Quranic school I must attend  
Far far away from home  
An almajiri I must become (*Songs* 42)

Additionally, educational institutions are one of many that generate ideologies humans internalise and act in accordance with. *Al-Majiri* education system ideologies include reward for a glorious heaven for both the child and his parents, “Of unpromising future built-in our psyche” (*Songs* 5). The *Al-Majiri* voices have come to realize that “The destiny that was painted

in colours” (*Songs* 31) is mere misinterpretations. Hence studying under unusual circumstances, in harsh conditions, sleeping in an uncomfortable cramped room, the *Al-Majiri* wishes to abscond from his initiation to heaven, “I Dan Almajiri want play hooky,”- the ‘to infinitive’ omitted by the Signifying Monkey (*Songs* 5).

The *Al-Majiri* scholar is not a beggar but is simply begging to survive, as the lone voice of Ibrahim decries, “Seen as blithering beggars- Survival they are begging for” (49). Experiencing the height of starvation, the *Al-Majiri* resorts to begging. Ogunkan (129) and Azouz (5) write that the misconception of the concept of *Al-Majiri* to mean beggar is one of the factors that links Islam to begging, unlike *mabarata* (beggars) who sometimes raise money through begging, the *Al-Majiri* is only out to beg for leftover food, old clothes, soap to wash and bath. He may not be among the three eligible persons that Islam permits for them to beg. But roaming the streets and homes in search of food and sustenance in his new found ‘home’ due to his parent’s negligence, would qualify him as one who is in dire need of assistance, one of whom the Qur’an mentions and has ask the believers not to rebuke: “And repulse not the beggar [one who asks for help]” (Qur’an 93: 10: Al- Hilali & Khan 841). However, the *Al-Majiri* is not only rebuked but often insulted, chased away or offered inedible food, leading to the next discussion on stigmatization as explored in the voices in *Songs*.

### **Stigmatized and Traumatized**

Employing various literary devices, Umar, Eneojile, El-Yakub, Yakub and Kolawole’s polyphonic voices iterate the theme of stigmatization, social rejection, and the crippling effects of such on the psyche of the *Al-Majiri*. From the third person point of view, in unrhymed couplets the “The Abandoned Soul” opens with a lamentation heard in the sad voice of the narrator: “The world appears to be against them all. They struggle while others prosper” (*Songs* 1). The hyperbolic use of the word “world” connotes a broad spectrum of those the poet views as responsible for the *Al-Majiri*, yet the situation remains under their complicit watch. These

group of people will include parents, societies, communities, states, governments, “the so-called human rights groups” (*Songs* 8), nations, and continents- “We are all guilty in this” (Maishanu, 2022). On this note, Azouz (2020) also observes that the poor and marginalized *Al-Majirai* do not seem to be a priority to any of the countless NGO’s roving Northern Nigeria, nor are they a priority of federal or state authorities. And they are “already wasted from home- Begging their destinies away” (*Songs* 76). This singular act of begging transforms them into detestable and desolate objects in the sight of men as depicted through imagery, personification hyperbole and synecdoche in the polyphonic voices below:

We cannot write but we can read,  
The love of men and their hatred. (“Zaafi” 15)

Denigrated with words that slam worthy ears  
In return they thank you no less (“The Dirty Scum” 18)

Traumatized by the society  
Stigmatised by the world (“The Seeker” 31)

Lucky if an inedible leftover I gained  
Tongue rejected but the hungry belly grabbed (“Dan Almajiri” 4)

Yakub’s voice offers a graphic presentation and exemplifies the situation with dialogue:

He stretches his bowl for a giver’s bread  
His eyes lights in hope of a clacking coin  
But dismissed with a snarl and cold snub  
He cringed in tears--- as their cusses bite  
“Depart and stain not our graceful souls  
We can’t stand so gross a sight” (“A Bag of Hope” 58)

Like the Subalterns they are, the *Al-Majirai* work to resist stigmatisation through “overt or covert” means, in this instance a facade to shield themselves off abuses, “We form a protective wall of rascality” (16). The togetherness of the *Al-Majiri* cohort offers them a sense of solidarity. Hoechner (718) writes that *Al-Majirai* are painfully aware of negative opinions about them and frequently voice their distress about being insulted, chased away and physically assaulted while begging, but to occupy moral high ground is more valuable to the *Al-Majiri*

than to publicly retaliate, they resort to the belief that Allah would eventually ensure justice, criticising those that deny them respect for being evil, lacking faith and knowledge (722).

That notwithstanding, the *Al-Majirai* also face additional challenges of torture inflicted upon them by their Mallams: “Those whips have married our bodies- We no longer cry against their rhythms” (*Songs* 15). This theme is reiterated in voices in “Castles in the Air” and “Allah Sarki Almajiri.” The *Al-Majiri* rarely ends his day without a whip on his back either for not reading aloud, dosing off in ‘class,’ failure to remit begging proceeds and other such offences. Bello reports in *Vanguard Newspaper* of 10 April 2022, a 24-year-old Mallam Ma’aruf Muhammad, arrested for severe torture meted out on an 8-year-old *Al-Majiri* boy, Muhammad Garba in Yobe state. The boy escaped from Yobe to Kano state by train. Disillusioned by their situation the *Al-Majirai* question their existence:

Why were we even born? Are we not  
but extra burden to the already burdened world? (*Songs* 15).

Using alliteration in the repetition of ‘b’ sound, the second line depicts the *Al-Majirai*’s cacophonous opinion of rather being deleted than exist (Maishanu, 2022). This leads us to the theme of destiny as explored in other voices.

### **Destiny**

Eniojile’s “Zaafi” is rendered by collective excruciating voices of the *Al-Majirai*. A poem of seven stanzas of scattered lines. The *Al-Majirai* metaphorically describe two categories of humankind- the rich and the poor thus:

Some are born with silver spoons.  
Some are born with no spoon at all.  
We are of them that never existed,  
We form part of forgotten memories.  
We are the exceptions of normal life. (*Songs* 15)

To these *Al-Majirai*, their existence is oxymoronic, they “never” belonged to the hierarchy of humanity. When one does not belong to any class, they cease to exist. The *Al-Majirai* however, “form” what Gayatri Spivak calls the Subaltern; the lowest layers of a colonial, post, or neo-

colonial society: the homeless, the day labourers, the unemployed- the voiceless and the invisible (Klages 81). The *Al-Majiri* is an 'Other' identified by two symbolic instruments: the begging bowl and the Qur'anic recitation slate. The *Al-Majirai* view their situation as destined:

But we could have been better,  
If like you, nature had smiled on us. (*Songs* 15)

In essence, the *Al-Majiri* can neither choose their parents nor choose their destiny, these are preordained by a power above them. Fate decides to privilege and impoverish some and value the *Al-Majiri* Other as extinct. They are exposed to physical and emotional torture through discourse of hatred when really, they deserve better from men that fate can also turn into *Al-Majiri*, "But for the Grace of Allah- It could have been you" (*Songs* 17) we hear Jojo's voice scold.

The theme of destiny is further traced to Kabir's three stanza "What a Life!" and the five stanza alternating lines of six and seven poem "Bleeding Hearts" narrated in the voice of the *Al-Majiri*. The former acknowledges "A fate chosen for me by my parents," and the latter uses flashback to recall the scenes of "that cursed day." In agony both son and a mother who is "About to lose her only son -To a world without pity," weep, and plead with the patriarch monarch; upheld by socio cultural conventions, whose heart the *Al-Majiri* metaphorically juxtaposes to a cold stone hence his refusal to oblige: "Alas! Unknown to her- My destiny has been sealed- My fate determined by others" (*Songs* 42).

Hurdled into a "rickety truck- Like a pathetic animal," the *Al-Majiri* begins the symbolic journey to hardship, inhumanity, and dehumanisation. The journey to Almajirihood could be likened to a journey of migration from two perspectives; from innocence (lost lamb) into the wilderness and subsequent rude awakening and, an internal migration (Roam!) from the rural area to urban cities in pursuit of knowledge. The latter can be contrasted with emigration which in Dorst's (2022) opinion involves a change in location not necessarily followed by a return journey, using different transportation systems as enabling factors in search of safety, security,

and dignity. These journeys are characterized by fraught and cramped spaces. Like the emigrant he is, the *Al-Majiri* often endures appalling travel conditions in lorry trucks or pickup trucks loaded with goods or animals. These rides are cheap and uncomfortable, lacking speed, pleasure, adventure, and comfort. A day after his arrival he immediately begins his pursuit of begging, composing *bara* (begging) chants to “feed his grumbling belly”. Waziri (13), El-Yakub (24), Shuaib (33), Shehu (35) and other polyphonic voices revolve around *bara* chants.

### ***Bara Chants***

In “Allah Sarki Almajiri”, the second person, You, is the *Al-Majiri* himself who chants the *bara* song within a song using a language that is peculiar to his cohort, demonstrating the multi-vocal, multi-perspectival plurality and social aspects of communication in humans, heteroglossia in Bakhtinian language (Shields 36,48). Shields further suggests the knowledge of the physical, emotional, and relational contexts of words to understand their meanings:

*Ko dan qanzo*<sup>1</sup>? You chant  
*Ko dan dago-dago*<sup>2</sup>? You chorus  
*... Don Allah don Annabi Maula*<sup>3</sup>

The communal chant serves as a survival mechanism, expressing a deep sense of need and dependence. The repetition of the language and the rhythm creates a sense of urgency and emphasizes the desperate situation of the *Al-Majirai* where every small contribution counts towards their sustenance. The phrase ‘*Don Allah don Annabi*’ invokes the listeners sense of piety and obligation to give alms. The *Al-Majirai* not only utilize their voices but also cultural and religious sentiments to appeal to people.

Another of the communal aspect of the begging practice where the *Al-Majirai* work together to make their pleas more compelling is during Ramadan:

It hurts me so much  
 To here a sympathetic hanting

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<sup>1</sup> Could I get a tiny portion of the burnt pot?

<sup>2</sup> Could I get a tiny portion of the inedible?

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of Allah and for the sake of the Prophet, I beg.



Wahidi!<sup>4</sup> Wahidi!! Wahidi!!!  
On 19<sup>th</sup> dawn of the day in Ramadan (*Songs* 33)

The introduction of Islam into Northern Nigeria brought with it new influences on folk music, one of which is the *tashe*, a form of religious drama performed during the holy month of Ramadan. Children and teenagers participate in the *tashe*. During this season, the *Al-Majiri* cohort move from house to house performing dances, songs and comedy plays, in return for alms from the households (Malumfashi, 2019; Furniss 122). In the first line of “It hurts me so much!” the speaker’s anguish is explicitly stated, setting the emotional tone for the rest of the poem. The repetition of ‘Wahidi’ serves as both a refrain and a cry of despair. The increasing intensity of the exclamation marks amplifies the urgency and desperation of a distressed voice. The phrase ‘sympathetic hanting’ with a deliberate misspelling of “hunting” or “haunting,” suggests something eerie or ghostly being pursued. In this context, it may symbolise the elusive search for food that is typically hard to find. Nevertheless, every day, the *Al-Majiri* persists.

The identity of an *Al-Majiri* is portrayed not just as a cultural and or religious role but as a marker of extreme vulnerability and hardship via begging in “Because I am Almajiri”:

Iya<sup>5</sup>, even if it is morsel  
Iya, even if it is the last scrap off the pot  
Iya, hunger has no conscience?  
Iya, hunger has no pity  
Iya, hunger has made me senseless

I move from doorstep to doorstep  
I move from markets to stalls  
Singing the damn song  
Just to get something to eat  
Because I am an Almajiri (*Songs* 40)

Like the Signifying Monkey the *Al-Majiri* uses direct translation from Hausa to English language for his *bara* chants, he employs images of sight, sound, and smell, uses both anaphora and epiphora to emphasise the notion of a wanderer and to create a rhythmic sense of

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<sup>4</sup> One God

<sup>5</sup> Mother

accumulated emotions, he pleads for anything edible from homes and markets, from his surrogate mother, Iya and from anyone who empathises. He personifies and questions hunger as it strips the voice off its dignity and rationality and for its absence of moral direction between two oxymorons: right and wrong.

In their bid to survive, life toughens the innocent *Al-Majirai*, often leading them to engage in minor bad habits like theft. Over time, these habits can escalate “ending in a pitfall- Of buggery and thuggery” (“Almajiri” 13), ultimately translating into significant criminal activities leading to dire consequences.

### **Dire Consequences**

The dire consequences of this harsh reality are evident in the street life that exposes the *Al-Majirai* to criminal activities due to their vulnerability. Today, these pupils are increasingly linked to shady behaviours and insurgency in the country (Shittu & Olaofe 2015; Aghedo & Eke 2013; Zaid & Rabiou 2017). In “I Know It Was You” (71), the *Al-Majiri* undergoes a transformation in character, he becomes increasingly malevolent as the last trace of his innocence fades. Gradually, the tables turn; he becomes master and the society slaves. Tragically, the *Al-Majiri* comes to be seen as a merciless master, illustrating the adage that evil begets evil. As depicted in “The Abandoned Soul” (1)- “The new hosts will have no mercy, for they have cried and no one heard.” These voices sound strong warnings to the world: beware of the inhumane treatment behaviour of the *Al-Majiri* scholar, for one day, the *Al-Majiri* may turn the world inside-out.

In addition, the problem of the *Al-Majiri* is pathologized as a social disease. Ojo’s voice compares the *Al-Majiri* to a virus:

I heard a boring scientist tale of how virus grows uninhibited  
They spread in their millions  
And the division is left for the scientist to count  
When I saw you by the street today  
Or the impact of what you have done on the TV  
...I know by instinct that the scientist was right

He was talking about you (“Virus” p 69)

On the one hand, understanding the pathology of the *Al-Majiri* will help one to understand the clinical features of his disease and how treatment should work. Applying Bezabeh et al’s (2004) research as a yardstick, the cause of the *Al-Majiri* disease identifies as a primary etiology. The natural history of the disease is the exposure to environmental factors such as mental stress, infections and infestations, viruses, protozoa, multiple nutritional deficiencies, and immunological factors. The pathological and clinical manifestations which lead to morphological changes can be seen with the naked eye (retard growth, weak immune system, and skin conditions among others). These remain the backbone on which diagnosis can be made by a pathologist; major stakeholders.

On the other hand, ignoring the clinical signs and symptoms turns the situation into a worst-case scenario, the voices warn. ‘The well-dressed’, symbol of the affluent, view the *Al-Majiri* as a nuisance, referred to as ‘pests’ or ‘parasites’ (*Songs* 1), metaphorically describing them as destructive organisms that survive by deriving their nutrients on other organism, in this case their ‘unwilling host’ communities. A virus is an infectious microbe which consists of a segment of nucleic acid (DNA or RNA), surrounded by a protein coat that can multiply only in living cells of animals, plants, or bacteria (Krug & Wagner 2024). However, a virus cannot replicate alone, it infects cells and uses components of the host cell to make copies of itself, in the process it often kills the host cell causing damage to the host organisms (Segre 2023). A vivid image of a fire ignites from a tiny spark into a full-blown fire describes the poems of Umar, Kolawole, Waziri, and Ojo’s. These voices assume the role of seers and envisage that the pathetic, wandering image of the *Al-Majiri* (virus) as he “runs around with reddened eyes, downcast and lost,” soon feeds his gut with the evil and hostility his host community displays. “The last trace of innocence wiped clean- By hunger, destitution and shame” (“Virus” 69), “Like anopheles mosquitos blood searching” (“Somersault” 6), “Their blood in anger to claim

their rights- From parents and leaders” (“The Dirty Scum” 18), “The abandoned soul is back claim and it will not stop until the evil it masks unveils itself” (“The Abandoned Soul” 1). This sounds terrifying! So, who is responsible for addressing the plight of the *Al-Majirai*?

### **Blame Game**

Some polyphonic voices in *Songs* criticise the negligence of leaders who have turned a blind eye and have gone deaf and dumb to the plight of the *Al-Majiri*. Sardauna (2021) voices his concern about Northern Nigerian elites who have over the years been indifferent to this ugly trend. Rather than use the resources at their disposal to tackle the problem, they instead exploit the misfortune of these children, he posits. This theme echoes in “The Dirty Scum” (*Songs* 18), “They are Children” (*Songs* 23), “My Country” (*Songs* 59), “Almajiri” (*Songs* 66). A voice further queries why the *Al-Majiri* is the son of the poor and not of the bourgeoisie – ‘moneybags’, in “No Longer Alms” (64). This is in line with Maishanu’s (2022) criticism on inequality, he points out that only parents of remote villages send their children to this ‘channel of no return’ and not those parents found in urban or semi-urban dwellings. “Give me the Natal Seat” (*Songs* 2) mocks the Nigerian state. Various state and federal governments have launched campaigns to address the *Al-Majiri* situation by providing livelihood support, banning begging or by setting up model schools, but the interventions fail in their implementations (NRN 2013). For example, in 2012, former President Goodluck Jonathan is reported to have spent about N15 billion to build *Al-Majiri* schools and to integrate basic education into the system. Today, a few schools remain incomplete, some complete and equipped schools are clad in thick dust and the buildings lay in waste, others have few students’ enrolment but are neither engaged in lessons in basic education nor catered for, hence begging persists, reasons would be due to non-supervision and implementation by agencies concerned (ICIR, 2016).

However, for scholars, writers, and critics, the *Al-Majiri* remains:

A topic and new trend for researchers  
Now an anthology dedicated to you

I see a way out through the ink  
As I chant your song my tough cookie  
*Allah sarki Almajiri (Songs 24)*

For decades, those groups<sup>6</sup> have continuously joined their voices to search for answers to the appalling conditions of *Al-Majiri*. The voices envisage a way out someday through the power of the pen; literature as advocacy. The mission of the poet, novelist, short story writers, playwrights, autobiographies, biographies, documentaries, and other literary writings emerge to create awareness and change the reality on ground; from the ancient Greek war of peace poems “Iliad” and “Homer,” to liberation from cultural hegemony and domination in armed liberation struggles in Latin America, Palestine and guerrilla wars in Africa, literature has unified people (and especially the use of polyphonic device) towards a common goal, helped to eradicate injustices and achieve socio political equity (Ramadan 2-4). Meanwhile, the *Al-Majiri* immerses himself in possible realities through images in the minds eye.

### **Dreams as Seers**

Amidst extreme dehumanization, dreams claim the *Al-Majiri*. Like a fairy tale, “Castles in the Air” pictures the *Al-Majiri* scholar seeking solace in dreams. Dreams according to Pal (2020), are stories and images our minds create while we sleep, which can be entertaining, fun, romantic, disturbing, frightening and sometimes bizarre and the dreamer has reduced control over the content, visual images, and activation of memory. Many researchers now believe that dreams are like overnight therapy and in Sigmund Freud’s opinion, ‘Dreams are the royal road to the unconscious’ (Pal, 2020).

‘Building castles in the air’ is an English idiom and a metaphor for entertaining daydreams that would never come to pass. It usually involves plans of grandeur that are nearly impossible for the dreamer to achieve. “Castles in the Air,” is an ironic title which outrightly states that

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<sup>6</sup> The Resource Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education (CHRICED), Anti-Slavery International (ASI), International Centre for Investigative Report (ICIR), Nigeria Research Network (NRN), UNICEF and academic literatures are examples of individuals and groups exploring practical avenues to protect the *Al-Majiri* child from exploitation, deprivation and exposure to danger in Qur’anic schools.

the *Al-Majiri* creates dreams, hopes, or plans that are possible for him to accomplish. 'Travelling down the land of dreams,' the *Al-Majiri* assumes a kingly status (a double consciousness), in the metonymy 'crown.' The crown is assigned to convey 'kings and queens to their abode,' using the 'instruments that flew.' At this moment the crown assumes the role of a captain on an airplane. As he flies through the next lane in his dream world, the *Al-Majiri* turns into a medical practitioner:

The crown dreamt  
Of holding the stethoscope  
To bring back dying souls  
From the world beyond (*Songs* 29)

Using the ungrammatical repetitive phrase 'And yet again,' the voice announces another possibility for the *Al-Majiri* child. He becomes a scholar, 'Building up knowledgeable path--  
In places that was once tagged unwise.'

And yet again he dreamt of being dressed with  
The amour of power and authority  
To make the lives of others better  
And make the land of his birth  
Honoured (*Songs* 29)

The metonymy 'amour' is personified as the symbol of a warrior- the signifying monkey at play. The *Al-Majiri* here is presented in the image of a proud warrior, a combatant who patriotically engages in the defence of his nation and her people, however, as the spelling 'amour' suggests by the signifying monkey, he is decorated in crippled armour, which leads to a crippled performance. Hence, before he wins the battle, 'The whip at his back,' jolts him to reality. He puts a pause button to his dreams as he finds himself chanting the Qur'an amidst his peers and the scrutinizing eyes of his Mallam. But 'Was he meant to be a chanter alone?' He poses a rhetorical question. He chants the Qur'an and those pathetic *bara* songs when ideally: 'He was a seeker -Of divine knowledge'. But Ironically:

... he was a crown  
That slept outside  
Dehumanized beyond description

“When will he find his place  
And sit on the rightful throne” (*Songs* 29)

The last two lines are the underlying theme of the poem. One can imagine an unrealized number of potential engineers, doctors, teachers, pilots, scholars, and many other professions embedded within the *Al-Majiri* system, the absence of Western education limits their opportunities to participate in modern realities. The House of Representatives in Nigeria had in November 2022 passed for second reading a bill seeking to establish a “National Commission for *Almajiri* Education and Other Out of School Children to Provide for a Multimodal System of Education to Tackle the Menace of Illiteracy, Develop Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Programmes, Prevent Youth Poverty, Delinquency and Destitution in Nigeria, and for Related Matters,” and for the first time, a house member also called for punitive measures against failure on the part of the operators of the commission when established (Nwabughiohu 2022). The bill was signed by former President, Muhammad Buhari, on 27 May 2023, to mark Children’s Day. On 9 February 2024, Acheme reports for *Voice of Nigeria* that the Minister for Education unveiled the office complex for the National Commission in Abuja. The Commission has since set to work. Hopefully, this will be a turning point for the *Al-Majiri*. His Qur’anic lessons will be blended with secular education, technical and vocational skills, to create a balance, and in time he will assume his rightful place on the throne as a scholar of both worlds.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has examined how the verses of *Songs* embody the theme of polyphony, blending diverse voices and perspectives surrounding the *Al-Majiri* dialogue. The poems engage in a "double-voiced" discourse, where a single utterance reflects multiple layers of consciousness. Each poem enriches our understanding of the *Al-Majiri* struggles, revealing a nuanced narrative of social rejection, stigmatization, the dynamics of the *Al-Majiri* education system and many more. This analysis contends that the multiplicity of voices within the

anthology creates a more holistic portrayal of the *Al-Majiri* experience and forms a complex dialogue that challenges oversimplified representations of the marginalized *Al-Majiri* cohort.

*Songs* emphasizes the importance of engaging with marginalized voices to cultivate understanding and empathy. Central to the anthology is the voice of the *Al-Majiri* child scholar, which emerges as a distinct and powerful melody, expressing the profound challenges of identity, belonging, and survival. The poems showcase the individuality of each child's voice, standing in contrast to societal assumptions, parental expectations, and the authoritative influences of religious and political structures. Delving into the roots of the *Al-Majiri* system, *Songs* highlights the interplay of poverty, neglect, and cultural beliefs that shape the scholars' lives. Yet, despite the harshness of their reality, the verses resonate with the resilience and hope of the *Al-Majiri*.

The rebellion of the Signifying Monkey, who defies conventional grammatical structures, reflects the dynamic interplay of language in illuminating the complexities of the *Al-Majiri* experience. The use of Hausa and Arabic languages alongside English enriches the poetic dialogue, offering a more nuanced expression of identity within its cultural context. This paper asserts that language in the anthology is not just a means of expression but a crucial tool for advocacy, encouraging readers to empathize with the *Al-Majiri* and recognize their shared humanity. Ultimately, the linguistic interplay enhances the portrayal of the *Al-Majiri*, deepens our understanding of their experiences and fosters a stronger connection between the reader and the text.

On the whole, beyond being a mere collection of verses, *Songs* emerges as a compelling form of advocacy, wielding the transformative power of literature to raise awareness and inspire change. It stands as a rallying cry for a future where these resilient voices are both recognized and transformed.



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