

Full Length Research Paper

(Re) writing postcolonial *Bildungsroman* in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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The paper will explore what is *Bildungsroman* and its history and how this genre has been tackled distinctively by the third generation African woman novelists. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is unique in using the genre *Bildungsroman*. The political- historical background of the text *Purple Hibiscus* will be focused on as well as the development of the protagonist Kambili both physically and psychologically in each stage of the changing environment, the awakening of the protagonist about her present condition and aspiration for a better future. At the same time how her interaction with people helped her to gain her self-awareness to stand against the forefront of her father. It will also cover the development of the protagonist to identify the indigenous identity and culture when truth is unfolded before her about the religious hypocrisy of her father. It will also focus on the feeling of exile during the stay at home and the feeling of familiar environment during the stay outside the home in postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. She explores her femininity and begins redefining her identity as she journeys into adulthood and she also observes the development and growth, the change that has occurred in her brother Jaja. Both the characters are developing in the novel which is marked by Kambili, the protagonist who is the narrator of the novel. The final section will portray how she finally gets the maturity and independence free from the clutches of everything which comes as a barrier for her development.

Key words: Postcolonial, *Bildungsroman*, identity, third generation woman novelists, freedom.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of African tradition the *Bildungsroman* has been structured in order to project the problems of twenty first century African youth conditioned by socio-cultural and political climate of the time. The protagonists attain maturity, self-realisation and can comprehend the necessity of creating their space in their concerned society as citizen. Ogaga Okuyde has divided the African

Bildungsroman in two forms: female and war *Bildungsroman*. Consciously or unconsciously the third generation women writers have used *Bildungsroman* in their plots. Helen Oyeyemi's *Scarus Girl*, Uzodinmalweala's *Beast of No Nation*, Sefi Atta's (2005), *Every Thing Good Will Come*, Unoma Auah's (2005), *Sky High Flames*, Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel*

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(2003), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2007, 2009), *Purple Hibiscus*, Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* Bendel Thomas's *The Sympathetic Undertake & Other Dreams*, *The Man Who Came In From The Back of the Beyond* abundantly deal with the theme of growing up characters. In most of these novels female characters either challenge their dominant fathers or husbands. The challenge involves a process of transformation where they grow into a self independent person with their new identity. The novels differ in the socio-cultural context and with regard to politics.

The third generation African writers are continuing the trend of first and second generation of African novelists. They are handling the theme with a change in political environment. Nigerian literature particularly deals with two contexts, either of decolonisation or of human space in post-independent society. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a story when colonisation started and the Christian Missionary came to the Igbo land. Adichie is the literary inheritor of Achebe. Fortunately she was living in the same house in Nsukka where Achebe was living. She also left studying medical just like Achebe did. She is connected to him both literally and historically. Her *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Head strong Historian* remind us of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. To some extent the story *The Head strong Historian* is similar to *Purple Hibiscus*. Both stories tell about gaining of cultural identity of two female characters Kambili and grace. Achebe is not only the role model of Adichie but also many New generation of Nigerian writers take inspiration from him. In the language of Kehinde in modern Nigerian novels audience get "tons of modern Achebelettes" (Ayoola Kehinde, 2006).

Etymologically *Bildungsroman* has its origin from German 'Bildung' and 'roman'. Bildung means formation and roman means novel. So it is about the novel of formation. Buckley describes the structure of the growing up of the protagonist under four stages (Buckley, 1974). The protagonist who is adorned with all good qualities leaves home, the different environment creates dilemma in him/her where the growth process is nurtured, then his/her growth process is tested by critical conditions and in love affairs and ultimately he/she reaches in his/her pinnacle of growth when they can take the best decision of their life.

The forms of the novels differ in the process of identity formation of the protagonist. *Sky High Flames* reveals negotiation of women in marginalised condition without compromising their sexuality. Ofunne grows by breaking the norms of society. She liberates herself from her role in the kitchen.

Purple Hibiscus shows a clash between western and traditional values, between urban and rural, private and public life where Kambili is brought up. Kambili's growth signifies the growth of the nation.

Sefi Atta's protagonist develops with continuity. Like

Kambili, Enitan searches for both female and national identity. *Icarus Girl*, *Everything Good Will Come*, *Imagine This* explore the young characters growing up in biculturalism, in different spaces and its harmful effect on them in post colonial society.

War Bildungsroman where child soldiers grow up is a common problem in African society. Iweala in *Beast of No Nation* through Agu examines in a sustain way the process of degradation of humanity to bestiality. The novel deals with the problem of hybrid space in childhood, clashes of civilization as well as various possibilities for change and resistance to the existing adult social order.

According to Carol Boyce Davies 2001, the issues of home and exile are presented in the autobiographical writings of Black women. Geography is another important element which is connected to culture, language, the ability to hear and ability to speak. It was Offuna's kitchen in her husband's house where she forced him to hear her. Her silence spoke more than her words. Anzaldua in "Borderland" talks about the silence nature of women. Though they hide their feelings and remain voiceless and do not show their existence, at times with their silence they prove their identity. Though Beatrice remains silent time comes when she cuts down the wild tongue of Eugene because "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (Anzaldua, 2001). Home is portrayed as a place of alienation and family acts to suppress women. What women speak, have spoken and are speaking is rarely heard. For Ofunne and Kambili home gives a suffocated environment where as in case of Omolola return to Feroza Jussawalla (2008) in her article "Kim, Huck and Naipaul: Using The Postcolonial Bildungsroman to (Re)define Postcoloniality" has told about both *Bildungsroman* and post colonial novel. To her post-colonial *Bildungsroman* mainly deals with a young protagonist's growth into nationalist. She has talked about three characteristic feature of post-colonial novel, regarding its language, theme and what it expresses. Post-colonial novels are written mainly in the language of the colonizer along with some colloquial expression. It deals with the journey of the protagonist towards indigenusness. The novel expresses the protagonist's pride in the indigenous culture. All the above mentioned characteristic features match perfectly to post-colonial Nigerian *Bildungsroman* text *Purple Hibiscus*. Adichie has started this novel with the phrase of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*.

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the etagere (Achebe, 1990).

The story is a continuation where *Things Fall Apart* ended with the death of Okonkwo and his son Nwoye's transformation as a Christian who has now become a teacher in Umura. Eugeng in *Purple Hibiscus* might be

the incarnation of Nwoye in the mind of Adichie and death of Papa Nnukwu without accepting alien religion is equal with the incident of Okonkwo's suicide. In another way Okonkwo and Eugene have certain resemblances in rejecting patriarchy. Both of them never want to be like their father. Both of them are ambitious. They want to become respected persons in the society.

In the opinion of Jane Bryce (2008), *Purple Hibiscus* is a "Bildungsroman". It encompasses both physical and psychological development of the protagonist Kambili and her brother Jaja. Ogaga Okayadu has defined four characteristics feature of female *Bildungsroman*. First, the realisation of the character about his/her condition. A boundary is created around him/her to curtail their development. Second, the protagonist develops awareness by creating contact with women who help for self realisation. Third, protagonist's discovering of femininity in her. Four, it is the final stage where the protagonist gets her maturity to take their own decision and their journey of self realisation ends. Kambili is an obedient, calm and quite person. She is good at study. She understands the feelings of others. She is unaware of the outer world because of the restriction of her father. She becomes aware of things around her when she goes to Nsukka. She realises her femininity when she comes close to Father Amadi and falls in love with her. The story is narrated through Kambili because she faces both destructive and inspirational characters with her own shortcomings and at the end gains the perspective to tell her life story. Hence Heather Hewett says, Her transformation contains more than a share of sadness, and the novel ends on a mixed tentative note. Having extricated herself from the trauma of her past Kambili finally has the strength and self possession to bear witness to all that has happened. Like Nigeria itself, she now must find her way forward slowly, resolutely, indefatigably- into the future (Hewett, 2005).

The narrator Kambili is recounting the story three years before. Three years ago she has the notion that her father is infallible man, equal to God. She has this idea when she is in Enugu and Father in the church places her father in the position of god. But her journey unveils the mask of her father's tyranny and fundamentalism. Her house is the representation of the then Nigerian corrupt politics (society) and religion (church) which need immediate reformation. Eugene is portrayed as a responsible citizen who is also the guardian of democracy. He runs a newspaper and encourages writing truth in it. He criticises the undemocratic state affairs. But in his house he is the sole person who rules in the house and his voice is only heard.

The development of Jaja is marked from the beginning of the novel. It is observed by Kambili when Jaja denies his father to go to church because the wafer gives him a bad smell. His father says it is "Christ's body" (6) and refusal to receive wafer is death. He accepts death than

to obey his father. "Then I will die papa." (7) He even asks his father for his room key for his freedom and does not come to dine with his family and closes his room with his study table. The resentment of Jaja creates fear in the heart of Eugene. "There was a shadow clouding Papa's eyes, a shadow that had been in Jaja's eyes. Fear. It had left Jaja's eyes and entered Papa's" (13). Kambili marks the defiance in Jaja as the impact of the environment of Auntie Ifeoma. She says,

Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertone of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (16)

In Nsukka, Auntie Ifeoma in one occasion tells to Jaja about the meaning of his name. Jaja is the name of Opobo king who was defiant against the Britishers to rule over him and as a result he was banished. Auntie Ifeoma tells defiance is like marijuana which is good if done properly. In the third chapter "After Palm Sunday" Jaja's growth has been completed who is now not asking his father for permission but imposes his will on him to visit his aunt. "We are going to Nsukka today, not tomorrow. If Kevin will not take us, we will still go. We will walk if we have to" (261). On his return from Nsukka he got the strength from his cousin to shoulder the responsibility of his family. So at the end he accepts the crime of murdering his father which was actually done by his mother.

The narrative is developed in four places, in their home in Enugu, in school, in church and at their auntie's home in Nsukka and for a few times in Abba. School and their house were just like sophisticated prisons for them because it was a life based on routine and religious rituals dominated it heavily Whereas, environment in Nsukka provides Jaja and Kambili ample space for their development.

The environment in Auntie Ifeoma's house gives them relief from the fearful climate of their own home. The house in Nsukka gives them a sense of serenity and love which is absent in their home. Ifeoma is the agent in the novel who gives Jaja and Kambili strong protection from their tyrant father and good guidance on religion, on good and bad. Okuyade believes mentoring helps Bildung process a successful one. So, Nussuka's environment, Ifeoma Father Amadi and the children of Ifeoma were mentors for Jaja and Kambili under whose guardianship they attain their maturity. Jaja grew up there. He is now closer to his cousin and Papa Nnukwu, his grandfather. He even starts to listen to stories from him and spends time with him which was prohibited to both the brother and the sister.

In their house they are not allowed to talk in their native

Igbo language. When in childhood their language is repeatedly attacked as vulgar. How could they improve their “sense of self” (Anzaldua, 2001). Because “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I can’t take pride in myself” (Anzaldua, 2001). They find the use of Igbo language in Father Amadi’s church. Even in their aunty’s house all of them are using Igbo language. So language is another factor for which Kambili can understand the hypocrisy in her father.

The new avenue of religion is opened before Kambili through Father Amadi which is completely different from Father Benedict and his own father who represents British colonialism. Aunty Ifeoma often calls him a “colonial product” (13) because he went to study in England before the civil war ended. According to Said (2001), it is Eugene’s knowledge which helps him to rise “above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant” (879). He keeps himself away from his culture, tradition, religion, language, and way of living and above all from his loving father who always prayed for his well being.

Kambili considers sleeping in the same room with Papa Nnukwu a sin. He tells it to Father Amadi. He knows the religious idea of her father is governing her life. He asks her “why is it a sin?” (175) and he answers the question “your father told you that” (175). Kambili’s idea regarding religion changes and her development is completed. She no longer considers her grandfather heathen. Father Amadi acts like an agent in the novel in the life of Kambili who tries to bring her out from her silent world in the name of God. He takes advantage of her religious attitude and makes her run four times in the football field. On their return from the playground she smiles first time in the novel. Her running and smiling is a mark of her journey from silence towards gaining voice.

On their return to Enugu as a token of freedom Jaja brings the plant of purple hibiscus and Kambili brings the incomplete painting of Papa Nnukwu. To Heather Hewett the picture symbolises the growth of Kambili’s world which includes her grandfather, her aunt and Father Amadi. When her father finds the painting in the house and comes to know it has been brought by his children gives him a shock and he tears it. He knows his father represents old traditional religion and of democracy. He never wanted his influence on his children’s life. So when he finds his father’s influence is deep rooted in their heart he becomes cruder. Kambili obstructs him for doing so and lays on the pieces of paper strewn like “the picture of a child in the uterus” (210). Her laying position is enigmatic of the birth of a child who is still in the uterus. It means after this incident she will be reborn. The change, the development what she has gained in Aunty Ifeoma’s house is now reflected in the house. She disobeys her father’s order of rising from the floor. Because she is more close to the painting which is the representation of

her root culture, she does not feel the full impact of the beating of her father.

The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka’s music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself together around the piece of painting, they were soft feathery. They still had the metallic smell of Amaka’s paint palette. (221)

The denial of Kambili shows her rejection of her father’s rigid religious norms which is inhuman. She is now able to break free of her earlier social and religious life. When Eugene knows Kambili slept in the same room where Papa Nnukwu was sleeping he bathes her feet with hot water. But it yields nothing. She no more obeys her father. Now she has recognised her true culture. Her experiences in Nsukka have formed her like that. She learns to cook traditional Igbo dishes, knows how to peel yams, and enjoys Igbo festivals in Nsukka. It brings her closer to Igbo culture.

The African postcolonial *Bildungsroman* deals with various problems of postcolonial society. *Everything Good Will Come* is on women’s rights, *Waiting for an Angel* is on the abuses of human rights, *Becoming Abigali* with problem of illegal immigration and global sex trafficking in the west, *Graceland* with poverty, child labour, drugs, human trafficking in Nigeria, *Sky High Flame* with women education. But *Purple Hibiscus* deals with the problem of colonialism and Kambili’s fight against her proto – colonial father (Okuyade, 2009).

The novel begins with silence and ends in silence. But the silence from the beginning is different from the end. So it has the title “A Different Silence”. It ends with the metamorphosis of Kambili with new hope. The book begins with silence and ends in silence. However, the silence at the concluding phase of the book, which also marks the wholeness of Kambili’s metamorphosis, is distinct. At the beginning of the book, the children and their mother rely heavily on silence and live on assumptions. This silence is dopey and empty. At Nsukka, a different kind of silence descends upon Kambili - this silence is dialectical. The two types of silence are different from the one she experiences at school. With Jaja’s confinement, another form of silence eclipsed them but this one is only fleeting. After the death of her husband and the incarceration of Jaja, Kambili’s mother cracks and retreats into silence. Jaja while in prison cloaks his worries and pains behind an air of insouciance and silently observes his mother and sister. Kambili on the other hand retires into silence in order to liberate herself from the realities of the predicaments that have stormed her family. The death of Eugene, no doubt, further irrigates the silence. On the whole the last shade of silence that beclouds their sense of imagination could be said to be furtive, because it is a silence characterized by hope and dreams (Okuyade, 2009).

Conclusion

Finally Kambili wins over the proto-colonial power against her. She is the purple hibiscus who has made her root strong, who no longer needs the help of anyone to grow.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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