

Weaving Memories of Childhood: The New Nigerian Novel and the Genre of the *Bildungsroman* Ogaga Okuyade

Currently in Africa, there is the constant apprehension and anxiety over the inability of the African literati to acquire and assess novels of the third generation of African writers. The dearth of novels of this generation has no doubt created a creative hiatus psychologically. Most of these novels are published abroad and the writers are resident in the West. Thomas Hale describes the phenomenon as a “permanent African literary diaspora” (18). The novels of these exiles are either not found in Nigeria or are too expensive for many people, taking into consideration Africa’s generally weak economy. If one is able to find these books, the price is intimidating. Bernth Lindfors describes this threat as the “constraints on the globalization of African Literature” (17). While Charles Larson laments that, if the situation is not approached pragmatically, African writers will “be read almost exclusively in the west” (5), and “the African writer will become extinct” (6).

In an editorial in *African Literature Today*, Ernest Emenyonu asks a barrage of questions which articulate the compass of the African writer’s thematic concerns and express the urgent need for the writers to evolve new templates to redirect and sustain the hopes and aspirations of the African peoples. Two of Emenyonu’s queries are ultimately of monumental significance to African literature: “What should be the concerns of African literature in the 21st century?” and “What challenges does African literature pose for writers, critics, teachers, publishers and the book industry in the 21st century?” (xii).

The last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the third millennium exhibit a subtle shift in the artistic curve of African literature, especially in the novel genre. This shift is not total, as it were, but it marks the beginning of a new epoch. This curvature does

not denote that the new writers have signaled a complete distinction from the narratives of the succeeding generation—making them new wine in antiquated kegs. Their styles and thematic concerns do not only bequeath the badge of newness and “nowness” to their arts, but also give them a discrete position in the development of the African novel. Prominent among these resurgent and rhapsodic voices are David Odhiambo, Zakes Mda, Ike Oguine, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Okey Ndibe, Uzodinma Iweala, Unoma Azuah, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Moses Isegawa, Diane Awerbuck, Phaswane Mpe, Chimamanda Adichie, Chris Abani, Sefi Atta, Helon Habila, Maik Nwosu, Akin Adesokan, Amma Darko, Shimmer Chinodya, Yvonne Vera, Calixthe Beyala, Zoë Wicomb, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a first generation African novelist, and Tanure Ojaide, a seasoned poet of the third generation of African poets, to mention only a few. Most of these writers employ oral “poetics” such as proverbs, myths and folktales to address post-independence concerns. Charles Nnolim contends that “the Nigerian novel is dynamic rather than static and blends the new with the old...” (“Trends” 53). Nnolim’s contention explains why the novel in Nigeria in particular and Africa at large still reads like a jeremiad. African writers continue to create their arts on tear-soaked canvases.

It becomes glaring that literature cannot escape contemporary history which furnishes it with raw materials. One still notices the contortions on the faces of Africans, foregrounding Africa’s bleak political landscape which is characterized by government misrule and arrogance, the moral depravity of rulers, mindless civil wars, ethno-national conflicts and the passivity of the ruled. Brenda Cooper aptly captures this bleak kaleidoscopic landscape as “the paradox of the unity of opposites, the contested polarities such as history versus magic, the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death ... the mode that combines a mixture of profound pessimistic view of life in disarray and a glimpse of a hope in the twilight of tomorrow” (1).

The experiences of the third generation of African writers are not too distant from the first and second generations of African novelists; only the political atmosphere differs. The project of their writing remains the same. Invariably, the outstanding attribute of the African novelist,

according to Abiola Irele, is an “immediate engagement with history” (69). In this context, African literature at large and Nigerian literature in particular have been thematically bifocal. It is either geared towards the issue of decolonization or the appraisal of post-independence malice. Because of this dual thematic trajectory, Ayo Kehinde posits that the “African novelist may therefore envisage at least, a near-perfect world that is not wholly engulfed in crises, a world where man experiences, at least, a substantial amount of concord and tranquility. Indeed, a new millennium a new century and a new decade needs a new fictional representation” (97).

In a similar vein, Nnolim challenges the African writer to “envision a new Africa, which has achieved parity (politically, technologically, economically, and militarily) with Europe and America” (“African Literature” 9). He asserts in another essay that until these challenges are met, African literature will continue to be “operated on a narrow canvas” (“In Search” 8). Both critics seem to recommend that the African writer should go beyond the representation of pain and the burdens of nationhood in their arts and inaugurate a kind of utopia to sustain the hope of independence expressed in the euphoria of that moment. Indeed, the search for a stable national identity should be a continuous exercise. However, every writer derives his/her thematic preoccupation from society. Invariably, the novel becomes the shadow of the society that produces it. The new millennium does not signify a significant change in the fortunes of the African people; literature remains the mirror of society. Since African literature is very political, society appears in a commanding light with history as its lightning rod. The writer is not only a “righter” (Osundare), but also a sage and a prophet; his or her prophecy is therefore dependent on the society and the ability to translate imagination, which is usually fertilized by the society, into reality. Politics and history are no doubt the twin items the African novelist employs as literary and artistic intensifiers. Nobody prescribes to a writer; it is his/her response to exigent and urgent issues affecting society that is of paramount importance to him/her. This is what gives art its elasticity; thus Samuel Asein insists that a “writer should play a purposeful role in the human drama of his time” (74).

In a similar way, when considering the contours of the African political landscape, Paul Beckett and Crawford Young suggest that Nigeria has chosen to remain in “permanent transition” (4), and the novel will continue to capture the tears of the ruled. Though the wind of globalization continues to blow through Africa and democracy sweeps through the African landscape, the gender geometry is still asymmetrical and religio-ethnic upheaval exceeds expectations as they remain a reoccurring decimal in the history of the African people.

There are also the problems of the gross infringement of human rights, brain drain and massive exodus (intellectuals leave; the conditions of the poor remain the same). There is environmental and economic devastation of the rich resources of Africa, and political assassination has become rampant. Coupled with the problem of ineffectual leadership are leaders who employ brute force as the major currency of political and social interaction thereby strengthening a fraternity of war lords. In Nigeria, for instance, the new millennium only witnessed changes in the attire of the rulers and the ballot box. The ballot box in Nigeria was before metallic, and then glassy, but today it is made of polythene and transparent, which should represent the transparency of the democracy. However, the polythene itself becomes a symbol of the cryptic and abstruse nature of the Nigerian democracy; the government remains ossified since independence; the people remain permanently debilitated. Describing the new features in the Swahili novel, Said Khamis (2005) coherently captures the thematic concerns of recent African novels:

Thematically, the new novel is inward looking, showing East Africa and perhaps Africa as a whole, as experiencing “real” and “psychological” wars whose aftermath ensues frustration and desperation from the citizenry, worrying about declining economies, mounting corruption, rapid population growth, bloated and at times repressive states, collapse of the basic infrastructure, gross infringement of human rights, deterioration of physical and social life, cultural decay and loss of political authority—hence anarchy, apathy, and the incorrigibility of

the politician. In this double-edged socio-economic relationship of power and oppression, a common tenacity is the degree of wrath depicted by the writers of the new novel. (95).

Since self-rule for the African peoples continues to yield less than proportionate returns and crises of varied dimensions have become the new order in the continent, the hope independence initially engendered has been dashed. The failure of government to translate independence to socio-economic bliss provoked widespread skepticism towards what Kenneth W. Harrow describes as “the inevitable indifference of the wealthy and powerful to the enormous social problems at hand” (33). If the first generation of African writers grappled with the issue of the colonial subjugation of Africa and responded through the celebration of cultural nationalism in their writings, writers of the following generations have more to contend with because the socio-political and economic disorder of the postcolonial present continues to be overwhelmingly discouraging. The obvious failure of Africa’s post-military democracies has made a tremendous number of third-generation writers feel a demand to construct their own values from the only material available to them—the events of their personal lives. Like the writers who wrote from the second half of the twentieth century who used their art to advance nationalism, this generation of African writers has withdrawn from nationalism; thus from the 1990s, almost every first novel appears to be a novel dealing with the topic of adolescence.

The novelist is without doubt a representative of the people at large and his/her story is the story of the people. Helen Chukwuma states that the novelist does more than simple storytelling in a beautiful manner, “he arouses in the reader a true sense of himself, evoking his past and linking it to the present” (vi). Since the African novelist is not just a mere storyteller or observer, the art of the novelist, according to Dan Izevbye, “recreates for us the problems and effort of a people creating a viable culture in response to the demands of their environment, and it gives us frequent insights into the effect on men of the culture they have created” (17).

II

This article examines the *Bildungsroman* within the tradition of the African novel in order to reveal the subversive strategies these new African writers employ to Africanize a western-oriented narrative form within a postcolonial context to account for African experience. The *Bildungsroman* has been extensively studied in the West, but scholarly works on it in Africa are very few. This could be attributed to the fact that these narratives are sometimes treated as juvenile fiction because of how they often feature children coming of age. I therefore, examine the sub-genre within a postcolonial African context and propose a model which demonstrates its continuing viability in African narratives.

Most of the novels of third generation Nigerian writers deal distinctively with the growth of their protagonists. As they mature they acquire self-knowledge, comprehend the true nature of the Nigerian socio-cultural order in which they have to live as individuals and develop a *modus vivendi* in the “war” in which they have been implicated as citizens, actors and victims. The development of the protagonists is usually physical and psychological, each stage corresponding to major areas of abode in the novels because the environment in which they find themselves influences their worldviews at any given time.

The existential bearings of the novels pieced with the progressive metamorphosis of the characters from ignorance to cognition aptly illustrate that the novels are *Bildungsromane*, novels of growth and education, since one of the major determinants of a successful *Bildungsroman* is change. Ebele Eko identifies the experience of growing up as a major trait in the novels of the third generation of Nigerian novelists; she opines that “they are actually describing the world around them, the events of their growing-up years” (45). Besides the novels being narratives of growth, they exhibit an autobiographical propensity. As debutants, one way to begin writing is to write and repackage the self. A keen assessment of Bandele-Thomas’ *The Sympathetic Undertake and Other Dreams*, *The Man Who Came In From The Back of the Beyond*, Habila’s *Waiting for An Angel*, Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*, Abani’s *Graceland*, Unoma Azuah’s *Sky-High Flames*, Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, and Iweala’s *Beasts of Nation*, eloquently captures the features of the coming-of-age theme.

One of the peculiarities of the *Bildungsroman*, according to David Miles is that “there lives in the confessor (protagonist) a painful awareness of change and growth, precisely the awareness that lies at the center of the *Bildungsroman*” (981). Chikwenye Ogunyemi, elaborates further on the traits of a *Bildungsroman* when she suggests that it “educates while narrating the story of another’s education. Interestingly therefore, both the hero and the reader benefit from this education” (15).

Bildungsroman is the literary label affixed to novels that articulate their cardinal concern on the development or education of the protagonist. It is etymologically German in origin: “*Bildung*” means formation, and “*roman*” means novel. Christoph Martin Wieland’s *The History of Agathon 1766–1767* is most times regarded as the first known example of this subgenre. It is, however, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, written in 1775 that took the form from philosophical to personal development and gave celebrity to the genre. The focus of the *Bildungsroman* is to lead the reader to greater personal enrichment as the protagonist voyages from childhood to psychological or emotional maturity. In his seminal work *Season of Youth* (1974), Jerome Buckley gives the anatomy of the typical *Bildungsroman*:

A child of some sensibility grows up in a country or provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile to his creative instincts or flights of fancy, antagonistic to his ambitions, and quite impenetrable to new ideas he has gained from un-prescribed reading. His first schooling, even if not totally inadequate, may be frustrating in so far as it may suggest options not available to him in his present setting. He therefore, sometimes at quite an early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home, (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently to the city (in English novels, usually London). There his real “education” begins, not only his preparation for a career but also ... and often more importantly ... his direct experience of urban life. The latter involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters,

one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity. His initiation complete, he may visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice. (17–18)

From Buckley's succinct description of the traditional structure of the genre, the growth of the protagonist occurs according to pattern; the sensitive, intelligent protagonist leaves home, undergoes stages of conflict and growth, is tested by crisis and love affairs, then finally finds the best place to use his/her unique talents.

From a different perspective, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the *Bildungsroman* presents to the reader "the image of man in the process of becoming" (19) and situates its protagonist on the threshold between different historical eras. He notes that "[The hero] emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergences of the world itself" (23). For Homi Bhabha the protagonist becomes apprenticed to "the art of the present" (1), while Susan Rosowski opines that in the traditional *Bildungsroman* the protagonist grows up expecting to learn "the art of living" (49). The *Bildungsroman* continues to function as a socio-cultural mechanism that tests what Franco Moretti describes as the various compromises between self and society, aimed at a proper balance between the two (9). He further argues that the defining characteristic of the apprentice novel or novel of formation is to be found not in the protagonist's organic or accretive growth, but rather in his youth. Most of these critics privilege the male protagonist; this is easily discernable from the intentional gendered pronoun.

Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland break new grounds with their anthology, *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. The introduction to the volume triggers the polemics as the editors articulate their resentment for Buckley's seemingly innocuous taxonomic definition of the *Bildungsroman*, which omits female ex-

perience from the genre. Hirsch and Rosowski present alternate models which no doubt challenge the existing canons. Both authors concur that social pressure, according to Tobias Boes, “directed feminine development in the nineteenth-century inward and towards the spiritual realm” (234). Thus, their essays touch upon and re-contextualize some of the themes that had long occupied scholars of German literature.

As the canon broadens with a new feminist agenda, the genre affords female writers ample opportunity to explore their femininity and initiate a process to disrupt gender tension. In her essay, “The Novel of Self-Discovery,” Rita Felski argues against the grain of feminist criticism when she refuses to condemn the *Bildungsroman* with its emphasis on integrative development as necessary patriarchal. Instead, she celebrates “the historical process of women coming to consciousness of female identity as a potentially oppositional force to existing social and cultural values” and disapproves of the so-called “novel of awakening,” in which the protagonist withdraws from society into narcissistic solitude with constant circumspection of the self (131). Susan Fraiman, therefore, envisages the female process of growing up “not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of crossroads” (x). The female variant of the *Bildungsroman* shall therefore provide the critical frame for this article.

III

In order to understand why Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and, Unuma Azuah’s *Sky-High Flames* fit so well in the category of the female *Bildungsroman*, I must define the paradigm and develop an understanding of what makes up this focused sub-genre. The female *Bildungsroman* has four distinct characteristics. First, there is the awakening, when the character becomes aware that her condition of life is a limitation to her aspiration for a better future. She begins to display tendencies of resentment and discontent for her geography, which she hopes to transcend. Geography in this context could be spatial and at the same time psychological. This prompts the character to question herself as a human being, her social status and her gender. Second, the main character gains self-awareness through her relationships with a network of women, who

guide and support her in becoming self-reliant in a patriarchal society. This network provides the character with moral guidance in the face of gender adversity. Third, the character explores her femininity and begins redefining her identity as she journeys into adulthood. Finally, as the character reaches a point of maturity and independence, she takes control of her transition or journey of self-discovery. The character reaches this pinnacle with the help of the women who have guided her. It must be noted that some *Bildungsromane* follow this paradigm more closely than others; it is not an exact blueprint. In order to easily commit the structure of the *Bildungsroman* to memory, the shorthand description of the genre is that it is a novel of 'formation' or 'education' that charts and traces the development of the passage from childhood through various experiences, usually involving a spiritual crisis, into maturity and the recognition of the character and her role in the world.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* begins in *media res*, realized through flashback. The novel charts the physical and psychological development of the protagonist, Kambili and her brother Jaja, a development which designates their struggle to define themselves beyond the stiffened and joyless world their fundamentalist father has designed for them. Their fussy mercantile father builds a world that lacks ventilation, which guarantees a steady relationship with the outside while the inside becomes too suffocating. The narrative is woven around Palm Sunday, yet the development of the protagonist and her brother has a quadri-lateral dimension: their home in Enugu, school, church and Nsukka. The latter has the most profound effect on their developmental process. Adichie describes her setting with unpretentious fidelity. Kambili's home is very typical of children from the wealthy, yet they are empty psychologically. Kambili is alienated socially, culturally and psychologically from everyone around her, except her brother, and she easily loses perspective. Kambili is not just divided through the unconscious or alienated by the 'myth of the modern,' the loss of natural self; she is fragmented most importantly through suppressed emotional sensation and psychological drive and what Mary Lou Emery describes as "eclipsed geo-cultural locations" (16). Kambili's home is wild and grand, but menacing. It lacks almost nothing, yet her home over-

whelms and blocks her psychological development rather than elevating and animating it.

As her father's **personality and presence in the home continue to truncate** any emotional and psychological stability, she develops naturally from the inside. Eugene, Kambili's father is a religious fundamentalist whose positions on moral issues are never adjustable, and he claims his bigotry is founded on the theological standards of Catholicism. He leads a life of rosary crossing and carries himself with a donnish air of Catholic superiority. His over-zealous attitude and clipped religious tone dwarf members of his family. He works hard to ensure his family lacks nothing. His houses are capacious yet stifling, and the bedrooms are very roomy, yet stuffy. Kambili's description of the contrast between their commodious apartment and its airlessness is telling: "Although our spacious dining room gave way to an even wider living room, I felt suffocated" (7). Coupled with the gagging temperament of Eugene's individuality and the choking apartment which is devoid of life, the surroundings will extinguish any seeming fire of growth ignited in the protagonist:

The Compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires, were so high I could not see the cars driving by on our street. It was early rainy season, and the frangipani trees planted next to the walls already filled the yard with the sickly-sweet scent of their flowers. (9)

Kambili, like the protagonist of a female *Bildungsroman*, exhibits a sense of 'awakening' which includes the recognition and acceptance of her limitations. If the psychological, cultural and the religio-graphic limitations of Kambili are summed up, what emerges is an empty silence. Invariably, the most important aspect of her transition or rites of passage is the quest for a voice. In order to attain her voice, she must transcend and traverse her geographical limitations.

Eugene owns a conglomerate including a publishing house reputed for its astuteness and unbiased reportage of the Nigerian political situation and above all its critical stance toward the virulent political temperament of the military regime in Nigeria. He urges his editor, Ade Coker to ensure that *The Standard* speaks out, yet his wife and children's

voices atrophy day by day because of the air of machismo around the house. Silence in Eugene's home is magnified to the extent that it could be touched. The function of Kambili's tongue is constricted so that her struggle to express herself usually terminates with a stutter, making her classmates observe her with familiarity tinged with contempt. Because of her inability to make her tongue function in school she is labeled a "backyard snob" (53). To aggravate her plight, when the closing bell rings, she dashes off to her father's **waiting car without exchanging pleasantries** with her classmates before the chauffeur drives her home. Her classmates interpret her actions as aristocratic arrogance. They are unaware that her life is dictated and regulated by a schedule scrolled in her heart. Eugene's productivity evidences his personality as a capitalist, as he comes home from time to time with new products from his factories to be assessed by his reticent family who have become complacent in their pathetic state of silence, created by his phallogocentrism. This phallic and capitalist arrogance is extended to Kambili's education. Together with the sickening and choking atmosphere characterized by her father's sense of material acquisition, her academic activity begins to lack creativity and enchantment. Both her home and school become a prison for her, as she slips down the academic ladder. The kind of educational system Eugene wants for his children is dehumanizing. He is mechanical in all spheres of life, and as such he condemns and discourages all forms of leisure. When Kambili comes second in her class, rather than encourage her to put more effort into her studies, he chides and asks a question about her rival: "How many heads has *Chinwe Jideze* [the girl who stood first]?" (46, emphasis added). He goes further to present a mirror to Kambili to ascertain the number of heads she has, and for fear of being tortured, Kambili devises a new method of studying:

It was like balancing a sack of gravel on my head everyday at school and not being allowed to steady it with my hand. I still saw the print in my textbooks as red blur, still saw my baby brother's spirit strung together by narrow lines of blood. I memorized what the teachers said because I knew my textbooks would not make sense if I tried to study later. After every

test, a tough lump like poorly made fufu formed in my throat and stayed there until our exercise books come back. (52)

Eugene's educational standards are not only faulty, they are equally banal. Hence Kambili turns the entire academic enterprise to cramming and calculation. Eugene's educational standards stress the training of the intellect without any complementary ties with the emotion and imagination. For Eugene, human reason is important. Kambili's life is reduced to facts and figures thereby subjecting her to mental torture. As the narrative develops one notices various forms of silence. Kambili, Jaja and their mother speak with their spirit. Sometimes they converse with their eyes. Kambili's mother hardly talks, and when she does, it is in monosyllables. Pauline Ada Uwakweh observes that:

Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women social being, thinking and expression that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or mutual female structure. (75)

In the novel silencing is not only a mechanism or weapon of patriarchal control but of domestic servitude. The children and their mother devise means of survival within the utilitarian calculus Eugene has created in their minds. One of the strategies is the domineering silence with which she observes situations and the other is through a filial bonding. Through bonding, mother and children are able to survive the domestic quagmire and the prescriptive religious zealotry of their father. From all indications, Kambili is almost orphaned though her parents are alive. Her father is too mechanical to help her realize her dreams and her mother too docile to be her role model. She never stands solidly enough to protect her children. It becomes glaringly obvious that Kambili wishes to escape from the confining patriarchal scripts of her home into a space G. Sanborn describes as "private enjoyment" (1334).

The psychology of Kambili and her brother's development is unstable. They are deprived of any outlet for emotional life except themselves. The constrictions and deprivations of Eugene's religious philosophy

strengthen their bond even more, because when confronted with any form of adversity, they look inwards. Their homes become a fortress for them and at the same time a symbol of vitiation. Even within this circumscribed space, Kambili continues her quest for her voice through eavesdropping. She tries to make sense of her father's conversation with his guests whenever they call. The journey towards the retrieval of her voice begins with what would have been the normal ritual of silence during Christmas celebrations, if her aunt Ifeoma had not shown up with her family. Kambili's **doughty aunt, Ifeoma, becomes a symbol of an iconoclastic identity and a demystifier of patriarchal and despotic establishments.** Though a Catholic devotee like Kambili's father, she creates the space that gives her brother's family leverage from domestic servitude.

Following Kambili's **acknowledgement of the limitations in her childhood**, which marks the beginning of her awakening, she struggles to overcome the pains of realizing that she is voiceless. Her silence makes her seem abnormal to Ifeoma's children and their reactions places her outside the social ideal. This awakening leads to the introduction of the second characteristic of the female *Bildungsroman*—guidance and protection from a network of strong women. Her mother lacks the ability to protect her from Eugene's incessant battering even when it is without justification. What Kambili's mother does is merely to nurse her back to health after regular assault. Her character is weak and for Kambili to grow up a stable woman she needs more than a nurse. Mentoring is an important aspect of the *Bildung* process. The protagonist is exposed to the realities of human existence through the guardianship of a mentor.

This is where the female *Bildung* process differs from the traditional male variant; the basic distinction lies in the association/mentoring process, bridging and bonding types. The former is inclusive and cuts across such social boundaries as those constituted by dominant traditions, culture, hegemonic control and sometimes religion. It is associated with crosscutting cleavages. The latter is exclusive and primarily associated with strong enforceable rules within a group where individuals know each other, but allow for a different standard when dealing with outsiders. The female protagonist finds a mentor(s) who *womentors* her to psychological maturity and this process could be described as

bonding, while that of the male is characterized by bridging. Kambili's aunt Ifeoma becomes her major mentor, while Amaka, Ifeoma's daughter could be described as a minor mentor. Both women give Kambili an opportunity to see herself beyond her father's world.

The character of Ifeoma has a threefold effect on Kambili. She is first of all the maternal figure who offers guidance to Kambili. She helps Kambili distinguish between right and wrong through her religious belief, and she helps her find her rhythm and balance in a society that is unbalanced by an asymmetric gender configuration. Second, Kambili sees her as a woman who is self-reliant in a male-dominated society. Third, she fathers and mothers her children efficiently. She plays these roles so well that her children hardly miss their father. Through this character, Kambili begins her initiation into womanhood. It is in her house Kambili learns the steep domestic business of cooking. Like Enitan in Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, Kambili never has access to learn the culinary arts. This aspect of her apprenticeship is important, since Kambili is looking for role models as she transitions from childhood to womanhood. This is a major characteristic of a female *bildungsroman*. Being an employed female who is responsible for the upkeep of her family and a woman who does not have to rely on men as crutches in a society where man governs everything, Ifeoma provides a unique insight into the role of the emancipated African woman.

Socially, Ifeoma is well positioned, but she does not intimidate others with her status as a female lecturer in a Federal University in Nigeria. She argues intelligibly and listens to others with rapt attention. She is able to provide for her family, clothe them, put food on the table, and she is able to offer a seat at her dinner table for an uninvited guest. Regardless of her brother's social position as a wealthy man, she is able to hold back. She does not beg him for anything even when she lacks such items. It is not because of her sense of feminism or academic pride, but a sense of independence, which makes her a liberated woman who belongs to the category of women Rosemary Moyana describes as "women who refuse to be compartmentalized into their chiselled up roles" (30). The process of creating her own voice begins with Kambili's discovery of her voice, which has been in a perpetual state of

passivity. Ifeoma's presence in Aba during the Christmas celebration is noteworthy because the vector of silence that has clipped Kambili's lips and the cloud-shielding rays of humanity from her life begins to shade into a tentative voice.

Eugene only grants his children audience with their grandfather for fifteen minutes. Anything more is seen as sinful and must be confessed before the priest for remission of sin. From her father's prayers and remarks, she concludes that her grandfather must be very paganistic. Eugene would not allow his father into his premises because their religious beliefs are characterized by a kind of inverse correlation. It is Ifeoma who gives Kambili and Jaja the exclusive benefit of knowing their grandfather beyond the atheistic portraiture their father has imposed on their minds. Kambili observes her grandfather with filial attachment from a distance because she has been controlled by her father's doctrinaire stance towards Papa Nnukwu.

Ifeoma is able to easily discern the unhappy lives her callow nephew and niece are leading. She observes that Kambili's expressions are glacial, unlike her children who possess the strength to initiate and sustain conversation inside and outside their home. In order to offer a different perspective in their lives, she prescribes a trip to Nsukka for Kambili and Jaja, a trip that begins to erode Eugene's unbridled religious hegemony. Although Eugene's acquiescence to this proposal is a welcome development to their mother, he gives them a schedule they would strictly adhere to because the schedule becomes a symbol of his authority.

"Things actually started to fall apart," when Kambili embarked on the trip to Nsukka. On arrival, Kambili is stunned by the polarity between the frolicking temperament that pervades the cramped apartment in Nsukka and their forlorn existence even in the midst of everything that should make life relishing. Kambili becomes confused by the untrammelled grace with which everybody carries themselves in the house. Her inability to comprehend these dispositions makes her retreat even further into silence.

For Kambili, Nsukka represents not only a town where her aunt lives, but a symbol of liberty as is obvious in the concluding chapter. Her

teenage development becomes complete in this town because for the very first time her mouth performs almost all the functions associated with it. She smiles, talks, cries, laughs, jokes and sings. Through Ifeoma, Kambili discovers Papa Nnukwu's sense of pantheism, as she watches him from a distance commune with his [G]ods—an occasion which proves the old man a better believer, who understands the intricate geometry of religion, most especially, the relationship between [G]ods and humans, thereby disproving and debunking her father's **stony fundamentalism**. For the very first time she lives a life not dictated by the schedule that was engraved in her heart. Ifeoma consigns her nephew's and niece's **schedules and adapts them to her world—a world characterized by the application of the commonest of senses**. In Ifeoma's house everybody has the *carte blanche* to say anything, provided elders are not insulted. The enthusiasm with which discourses are introduced and sustained is not only mind boggling to Kambili, but also causes consternation to her psyche.

Through Father Amadi, Kambili discovers a new brand of Catholicism, which is not mechanical and dictatorial but lithe, and directly contrasts the one her father and Father Benedict practice—one which makes room for dissent. Father Amadi discerns with relative ease that Kambili is dogmatic, because she is conditioned by the ritualized sense of religion her father has created in her psyche. He devises a means with which to draw her from her silent space. Since her sense of Catholicism is ritualistic, she is willing to do anything provided it is associated with God or Jesus. Through this device Father Amadi cracks her frozen sense of compartment and breaks through her programmed psychic networking. When Father Amadi takes advantage of her dogmatic naivety, she falls for the bait:

“Do you love Jesus? Father Amadi asked, standing up. I was startled. “Yes, Yes, I love Jesus”

“Then show me. Try and catch me, show me you love Jesus”. He had hardly finished speaking before he dashed off and I saw the blue flash of his tank. I did not stop to think; I stood up and ran after him. (176)

As Father Amadi continues to draw her out, she beams her first smile. Though icy, it is a process towards voicing. As she develops psychologically under the tutelage of Father Amadi, she commits a cardinal sin through a Freudian slip. Midway through her journey or apprenticeship she falls in love with the priest. At this point she does not know the implications and consequences of this psychic emotional drive. Father Amadi is perhaps the only man outside her family circle who has been so close to her. As she matures physically and mentally, her emotion builds up as well and reaches the climax with her sensational pronouncement of her love for the priest. This invariably becomes a vibrant statement of her first access to freedom of speech.

At the death of her grandfather, Kambili realizes that she had only begun to know him. Her aunt's children and Jaja seem to be closer to him but she is too distant—a fact for which she hates herself. As Kambili prepares to return to Enugu, Amaka gives her the uncompleted painting of their grandfather she was working on when he died—the painting symbolically becomes something she earnestly desires but cannot have. She handles the painting as if it were something sacred when their father takes them home to Enugu. The painting becomes the link between her aunt's world and Enugu.

Eugene notices remarkable changes in his children as they settle down from their visit to Nsukka. One such change though unprecedented is Jaja's unpretentious request for the key to his room. Eugene is astounded by this demand and decides to take pragmatic and overt steps to ensure he reteaches his children who have been dislocated from his doctrinaire standards. This demand provoked a cleansing ritual, which will purge and purify Jaja and Kambili of the sinful dust of Nsukka and the paganistic air of Ifeoma's home. Eugene bathes Kambili's feet in hot water despite screams of pains. The cleansing ritual yields a less than proportionate return because it does not produce the effects Eugene desires.

The children have brought two items from their aunt's home: Jaja brings seeds of purple hibiscus, while Kambili brings the uncompleted painting of their grandfather. Both items represent freedom from the rigid and despairing lifestyle of their father's world. With the seeds and

painting they are to sustain a steady link with their aunt's airy world en route to liberation. They hope never to plunge into the frustration, disillusionment, alienation, and existential solitude of the world they know too well. The items will help them fill the vacuum created in their lives. Her father suddenly discovers Kambili's painting as she and her brother are admiring their grandfather. Like the extremist that he is, Eugene takes the painting from his children who claim ownership of it. Stunned by their love of the painting, Eugene destroys it, and Kambili is unable to hold back because she is not ready to watch her father tear from her something she holds sacred. She had remained silent all her life and since she has retrieved her voice, she is unwilling to observe her father truncate the stable transition of her development, which the painting will help her realize even within the circumscribed radius of her father's walls.

The painting symbolizes freedom and also represents a connection to her grandfather that she was never permitted to have while he was alive. She begins to piece together the painting with alacrity and observes her father with a defiant air representing a rejection, condemnation and disintegration of the unproductive upbringing that her father has given her. The furtiveness with which she handles the painting criticizes everything her father stands for. He becomes stunned at the confutation of his conservative religious standards—a moment when he is completely subdued by the first shocking witness of the result of his rigid religious matrix. The honour with which Kambili handles the pieces of the painting symbolizes the collapse of her father's system. Rather than realize and admit that his philosophy is inhuman and ineffectual, with a doleful expression on his face he enters into an uncontrollable fit of anger and slaps Kambili into a state of unconsciousness. The trip to Nsukka has a domino effect in the developmental process of Kambili and Jaja.

Through this incident Kambili succeeds in breaking out of the social and religious silence of her father's authority; it is a definitive statement of rebellion against the phallogocentric and autocratic forces of society. The liberational quality of Kambili's voicing is cathartic as she takes total control of her expression, whether voiced or silent. After the death

of her father and the incarceration of Jaja, she becomes the head of the home, since her mother suffers a nervous breakdown.

In the concluding chapter, Kambili plays Fela tapes without any fear of violating standards. Fela, Nigeria's Afro-beat maestro was a bohemian artist. He is a symbol of freedom of speech, fair play and justice. His bohemian lifestyle and the lyrics of his songs pitted him against a succession of Nigerian governments. While alive, he suffered incessant incarceration. On Kambili's first visit to her aunt's home, the kind of tapes Amaka plays is despicably abominable to Kambili. Since she is now free, not simply because of her father's death, but also because she has reached the pinnacle of her development, she can easily discern between good and bad. She does not need to be goaded to make decisions; she is now capable of private thought. As she returns from Enugu the second time, she continues to exhibit emotional maturity; at the end of the novel she displays traits of functional autonomy.¹ She issues cheques to people as her will moves her. Kambili discovers her selfhood as she evolves from what she learnt at Nsukka, as she puts to use that knowledge to build her own worth. Ifeoma creates the avenue for Kambili to stimulate her self-worth. Kambili is able to rescue her mother who is dying from grief with what she learns during her apprenticeship at Nsukka: the art of communication.

IV

Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames* offers an account of the childhood of Ofunne, the main character of the novel. In the beginning chapters, Azuah paints an extremely vivid picture of childhood in a rural setting. The reader is able to enter Ofunne's mind and see the world through the eyes of a child. The novel begins with a startling announcement of the exigent and exacting responsibilities of occupying the privileged position of the eldest child of the home in a rural African society:

I was almost driven to hate my parents. My father never approved of anything I did. He felt he knew what was best for me, and my mother picked on me like a bird with a sharp beak. As the first daughter, I've always had to cater to every-

one's needs but any minute spent by myself was called day-dreaming. (7)

From a very tender age Ofunne's destiny has been decided. She is to remain docile and inactive in the household and kitchen where her parents continue to sustain her in a supine position. Her upbringing is strictly domestic, in order that she may later assume the role of chattel or become the object of the sexual amusement of some man. Her parents would do anything to ensure the course of her destiny is not truncated. She becomes entrapped at a very tender age. Although her parents' plans for her to become a fulfilled woman are a recipe for disaster, she psychologically maps out strategies for her liberation from the imposed state of controlled normalcy intended by her parents.

The escape from her entrapment is education. According to F. M. L. Thompson, "an education was a passport to respectability and a necessary ticket for entry to many trades" (136). Hazel Carby amplifies Thompson's **position on the importance of education as she strongly believes** that the education of females will prompt social changes and move women into a different sphere where they are no longer subjected to domestic positions which outrageously demonstrate the inefficient use of human resources. Carby sees education as leading to the full realization of the true potential of women whose talents have traditionally been grossly untapped. This is the goal Ofunne wants to achieve. Education becomes the prized commodity that will redeem women from been "confined to a domestic sphere" (99). Regardless of her under-privileged status as the eldest daughter in a rural family, she asserts that, "I wanted to be well educated with a high school certificate. I wanted to become a teacher and get married to the man of my dream" (7).

Azuah evokes the nervous tension of village life and depicts the dramas of every existence in a cross-section of the society—a society that is psychologically gendered, where people are not told what to do; they know what to do, because traditional gender roles are the central plank of cultural life. At a young age, Ofunne is able to resist attempts of the phallogentric precepts of her society to reduce her to a marginal status when she triumphs over the boys who are her immediate younger

brother's mates. The incidence dramatizes signs of incipient determination to overcome her marginal status.

From the beginning of the novel to when she is sold into marriage at an early age one will find numerous examples of attempts to socialize her into female roles, which will in turn render her uncreative and docile. She is saddled with the responsibility of the domesticity of her home. If she fails in her responsibility to supervise the family domestically she becomes accountable for whatever misery that springs from that failure. Thus, Iloba, her youngest brother holds her responsible for his being late to school. It is no surprise that when her entrance result indicates she passed, she abandons the homestead with uncontrollable excitement.

In contrast to the *Bildungsroman*, in which the male leaves home to "slay the dragon," Felski opines that "the female on a journey of self-discovery seeks surroundings that aren't a threat to her" (*Beyond* 135), a space that echoes rather than threatens her sense of self. It should also be noted that in the female *Bildungsroman* the protagonist never runs away. If she embarks on any physical journey for self-rediscovery, it is usually initiated by family members or friends. Ifeoma creates the avenue for Kambili's journey to Enugu, and Ofunne leaves her home for the sole purpose of acquiring education.

School for Ofunne is a place of becoming. She is the favourite among the teachers and students. Ofunne gradually learns to deal with the new environment. However, occasional fits of eccentricity, which propel her into exciting troubles with fellow students, result in the head teacher of the school chastizing her. Nevertheless, Sister Dolan, the head teacher of Ofunne's school, becomes the symbol of inspiration for Ofunne. She is a true matriarch who understands the exuberance of teenagers and helps them develop. She is a strong role model for Ofunne as she begins her transition from childhood to womanhood.

Ofunne's future suffers a setback with the indisposition of her mother. She is forced into marriage and her quest for education is truncated as she follows Oko to Kaduna to live as a child-wife, where she enters into the social space of female silence once again. Her school days seem to be the most eloquent and vibrant because that was a path to her liberation. Ofunne is stripped of her rights, which are supposed to include parental

care and guidance. She is found guilty of being herself and once more rendered invisible. Ofunne suffers more at the hands of her parents; as Philip Collins points out, “the adult world is generally hostile, vicious, uncomprehending or indifferent, or the child had to minister to instead of being supported by it” (182). Ofunne, for instance, is brought up by parents whose intention is to marry her off when a suitor comes calling regardless of her age and ambitions. Kambili is battered by her father. All those who should be nurturing them into womanhood constantly demoralize these female characters. These characters are not growing up stably. Rather, they are only haphazardly growing up without proper attention and care.

Ofunne’s deflowering after her mock-marriage becomes an initiation from girlhood into womanhood. Oko’s **aberrant behaviour and his promiscuity** are abhorrent to her sense of decency. This sudden revelation irrigates the silence in the home. Matrimony for Ofunne gradually becomes an arduous enterprise because her husband makes their marriage empty. She becomes convinced of Oko’s carnality and his unbridled lust when she remembers the steady gaze Oko gave her ample-breasted friend Uka on one of his visits to her school. The gaze is not just an amorous advance, but also an amplification of his promiscuity. At this point, the novel engages the existential themes of pain and exile. Out of frustration, when her state of loneliness and alienation deepen, Ofunne tries to return to the geography of her childhood through letters.

Taking her own expectations, which are regulated by a patriarchal society into consideration, Ofunne’s circumstances only serve to sustain her growing lack of identity. She refuses to find tranquility in the only space which society allots to her—the kitchen where she spends her childhood. As Oko’s wife, she has no choice but to become accustomed to the kitchen, as it becomes her private domain. She circumvents the rules of the “good wife” and discovers power. Whenever Oko lapses, Ofunne plunges further into silence and aloneness, which become frustrating to Oko. This is one of the strategies Ofunne employs to check her philandering husband. The other strategy is the use of her cooking, which she uses to curb her husband’s **excesses**. **Once he is found wanting**, Ofunne refuses to make meals for him. The kitchen becomes the

hub for action in the novel, and it is from this marginal space Ofunne attracts her husband's attention. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili's mother uses it to a dangerous end.

As Ofunne's pregnancy nears delivery, Oko decides to take her back home. Marianne Hirsch contends that women normally do not break family ties as easily as men irrespective of whatever offences are committed against them. Apart from these considerations, the return home actually contributes to Ofunne's self awakening—returning to the original site of dependency is a momentous step in the process. Hirsch notes that contrary to the *Bidungsroman*, which is linear in nature, the woman's "awakening" is marked by circularity—by a need for repetition (46). Felski substantiates further, that "the heroine must become what she once was, recover an identity which is complete and self-contained, rather than contingent, and historically and socially determined" (*Beyond* 141).

The novel climaxes as the full irresponsibility of Oko becomes apparent. Literary representation of women in urban environments often functions symbolically as loss of innocence—the pure daughter or mother of the village is reduced to a prostitute. Ofunne's case belies the above claim, because by the time she returns to the village, she is still naïve. Her refusal to allow the medical doctor to induce her to ease her delivery is evidence. Though Ofunne experiences a stillbirth, she reaches the pinnacle of her development after the delivery. When Oko has abandoned her at his parents' home, she fights her way from her shackled state as she physically defends herself against her mother-in-law's falsehood.

In *Sky High Flames* Ofunne's development peaks when she replaces her Catholic God. She attains physical and spiritual freedom as she returns home, when she presents herself empty before Onishe the water goddess. This scene eloquently dramatizes Ofunne's sense of religion. One may confuse her intention here. It is not the locale that dictates her spiritual and religious loyalty. She abandons the Christian God, who is an extension of male dominance. Her parents gave her to Oko not only because they wanted money to meet their needs, but also because they feel the Okolos are a good Catholic family. She abandons matrimony

because it becomes the symbol of her vitiation. She wants to be educated, but ends up being sold off in marriage. Her husband promises to allow her to continue schooling when they arrive at Kaduna, but she never goes beyond the marginal border of the kitchen and the docile space where she hawks fish.

Ofunne finally decides to find Sister Dolan and start afresh. She experiences an epiphany in a state of trance as she submits herself naked before Onishe. Jane Bryce misses the point when she argues that “[...] the ending makes a clumsy attempt at suggesting an intervention by Onishe, the river goddess” (56). Ofunne presenting herself before the water goddess does not suggest that the goddess has in any way intervened in her predicaments or rescued her from the crisis of matrimony and Oko’s mindlessness. It only indicates that the protagonist is willing to start all over again and she goes to this shrine to garner spiritual strength, protection and the will to begin anew. The act of stripping off clothing is very symbolic in African religions and metaphysics; it symbolizes total submission and the plea for regeneration which begins with a confession and then cleansing. Christopher Okigbo’s pilgrim in the “Passage” comes to mind here in his submission to Idoto after numerous wanderings in search for an elusive fulfillment. More so, Azuah uses the journey as a trope and this is dialectically sustained throughout the narrative; thus this belies Bryce’s argument. Obi Nwakanma aptly captures Ofunne’s dilemma: “Unoma Auah’s realistic novel is a powerful statement about the ‘right to return’ from innocence to self-awareness, from vulnerability to a sense of feminine power, in the story of Ofunne’s transition(s) in *Sky High-Flames*, from expatriation in Kaduna in search of a matrimonial idyll, to return to Asaba into the transcendence of matriarchal power” (12). Onishe, therefore, occupies a powerful space in this matriarchal configuration, which Ofunne recognizes, and submits to the goddess’s powers for regeneration and cleansing.

V

The journey of self-discovery is important because of its significance for women in general. A woman should be able to pursue whichever path she desires without fear of criticism. Kambili and Ofunne emerge from

their journeys as complete persons—heroines who battled their inner dragons and triumphed.

The greatest aspect of the journey, however, is that through the employment of this sub-genre, the reader has been able to accompany these girls, and that is one of the benefits of the *Bildungsroman*—to educate the reader. Both narratives fall within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, but its appropriation by the writers differs; Azuah uses the form to signpost the importance of female bonding as a strategy for traversing the dictatorial temperament of patriarchy in domestic sites, and the dangers of the experience of separation as obstacle to successful *Bildung*. Adichie's appropriation of the form, however, is more ambitious. She uses the growth process of her protagonist to interrogate that of her nation. Through varied narratological devices, the text explores socio-political problems as analogous to themes of patriarchal dominance. Despite their differences in plot structure and the developmental process of the protagonists, both novels deal with the conflicted, unpredictable spaces where each protagonist must find herself. As both protagonists continue their quest, they leave home for new locales where they have the opportunity to question their identities.

The two novels are eloquent examples of the African female *Bildungsroman*, as both writers employ different narrative approaches to describe these shared feelings of disorientation, conflict and revolt. As they traverse borders, both physical and psychological, they discover themselves in an unfamiliar state, a space full of so many possibilities and uncertainties that it is unnerving. However, the most fascinating aspect of both narratives is the fact that both protagonists achieve autonomy in the process of their socialization.

To sum up, the cardinal concern of this article has been to examine the transformation of the *Bildungsroman* in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Sky High-Flames*. As enunciated in the introduction, a conventional *Bildungsroman* functions as a program for identification with the accepted social order and value system as it chronicles the protagonist's assimilation of his or her society's values. Moreover, the *Bildungsroman* is a kind of narrative traditionally concerned with unmarked universal identities, that is, with Eurocentrism and the masculine.

Chimamanda Adichie and Unuma Azuah therefore, reconfigure and transform the *Bildungsroman* to capture African experience and in the process feminize and postcolonize the form. Both writers modify the *Bildungsroman* so as to draw attention to the specific experiences of the African woman within a particular historical and socio-cultural background. What is important about these texts is the fact that they foreground the contribution made by female African writers to African literature, showing aptly the complexities of identity formation in a cultural space and context where the gender geometry appears to be asymmetrically unalterable. The variant of the *Bildungsroman* that emerges from these narratives is not only African in temper, characterization and setting, it is equally subversive in content and geared towards liberation in all its widest possible dimensions.

Notes

- 1 The concept is derived from Allport's theory of personality development. Allport argues that children do not possess personalities as much as a collection of behaviours, which vary according to the needs of the moment (that is, children behave radically differently with their friends and their parents). The behaviours eventually coalesce into *selves*, which are sets of behaviours consistently used in different settings—the child a home self, a school self and so on. An individual reaches maturity when the selves in turn coalesce into a *proprium*, which is a personality or self relatively stable across situations. In addition, Allport saw maturity as involving shifting the motivation for actions from simply earning reward, avoiding punishment, obeying orders, etc. to motivation to do something for its own sake and virtues (*functional autonomy*). This shift in motivation is called the *lack of emotional continuity*.

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