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**Trying to survive:
Growth and transformation in African female narratives**

Abstract. A shift has occurred in the curve of the African novel, which invariably establishes the fact of a new generation of Nigerian novelists. This trend is focused on the *Bildungsroman*, a narrative of growth or novel of development, in which the protagonist grows, learns, and changes in order to take their place in the world. Although the Nigerian example is the focus of this study, novels from other sub-regions shall be assessed in order to demonstrate this development in the African novel. Since the cardinal defining characteristic of the *Bildungsroman* is change, which is not necessarily physical and not wholly psychological or emotional, but the transition from ignorance to cognition, it is therefore imperative to subject this change to dialectics in order to ascertain the quality of the transition and how liberational and cathartic the change is, after the *ophic* journeys embarked upon by the protagonists of the novels. Unomah Azuah's *Sky High Flames* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* form the basis of textual analyses.

Keywords: Growth, revolt, religion, womanhood, patriarchy, liberation, phalocentric, Bildungsroman

I

Currently in Nigeria, there is apprehension about the inability of the Nigerian literati to acquire and assess the novels of the third generation of Nigerian 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 they are too expensive, taking into consideration Africa's compromised economy, when one is opportune to stumble into these books. Bernth Lindfors describes this as "constraints on the Globalization of African Literature" (17). While Charles Larson laments that if the situation is not approached pragmatically African writers will not only "be read almost exclusively in the West" (5), "the African writer will become extinct" (6). Ernest Emenyonu, in his editorial article of *African Literature Today* No. 25, asks a barrage of questions which articulately becomes the compass of the African writer's thematic concerns and 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 questions are ultimately of monumental consequence to African literature. They are, "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 Nigerian literature, especially the novel genre. This shift is not total as it were, but marks the beginning of a new epoch. However, this curvature does not denote that the new writers have signaled a complete distinction from the oeuvre of the succeeding generations – making them new wine in antiquated keg. Their styles and thematic concerns do not only impress the badge of newness and nowness on their art but give them a discrete position in the evolutionary process of the Nigerian novel. Prominent among these resurgent and rhapsodic voices are Ike Oguine, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Okey Ndebe, Uzodinma Iweala, Unoma Azuah, Chimamanda Adichie, Chris Abani, Sefi Atta, Helon Habila, Tanure Ojaide, a seasoned poet of the third generation of African poets, to mention a few. Most of these writers employ oral poetics like 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 ...” (53). Nnolim’s contention explains why the novel in Nigeria still reads like jeremiad.

Nigerian writers continue to wring their art from tear-soaked canvas. It becomes very glaring that literature cannot escape the contemporary history which furbishes it with raw materials. One still notices the contortions on the faces of Nigerians, foregrounding Nigeria’s bleak political landscape, which is characterized by governmental misrule and arrogance, the moral depravity of the rulers and the debility 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 hope in the twilight of tomorrow” (1). The experiences of the third generation of Nigerian writers are not too distant from the first and second generations of Nigeria novelists, except the political atmosphere that differs. The temper remains the same. Invariably, the outstanding attribute of the Nigerian novelist, according to Abiola Irele, is “his immediate engagement with history” (69).

African literature at large and Nigerian literature in particular has 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,

the Nigerian novelist may therefore envisage at least, a near-perfect world, that is not wholly engulfed in crisis, 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 similar vein, Charles Nnolim challenges the African writer to “envision a new Africa, which

has achieved parity (politically, technologically, economically, and militarily) with Europe and America” (2006: 9). He asserts in another essay that not until these challenges are met, African literature will continue to be “operated on a narrow canvas” (In Search: 8).

Literature, and the novel in particular, does not exist in isolation; neither do its raw materials form in a vacuum. Every writer derives their thematic preoccupation from the society. Invariably the novel becomes the shadow of the society that produces it. The new millennium does not signify a significant change in the fortune of the African people; hence the literature remains the mirror of the society. Since Nigerian literature is political, the society becomes the commanding height, and history its lightning rod. Politics and history are no doubt the twin items the Nigerian novelist employs as literary and artistic intensifiers. Nobody prescribes to a writer; it is their response to exigent and urgent issues affecting society that is of paramount importance to them. 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).

However, when considering the contours of the Nigerian political landscape, which has led Paul Beckett and Crawford Young to contend that Nigeria has chosen to remain in “permanent transition” (4), the novel will continue to capture the tears of the ruled. Though the wind of globalization continues to blow through Africa and democracy is sweeping through the African political landscape, the gender geometry is still asymmetrical, religious upheavals exceed expectations and they remain at a recurring decibel, still there is the gross infringement of human rights, the brain drain and massive exodus, the fortune of the *low downs*, which remains the same, while environmental and seismic devastation ruins the ecological fortunes of Nigeria, and assassination has been tactically bureaucratized. The new millennium signifies changes only in the attire of the rulers and the ballot box that have undergone a metamorphosis.

The ballot box in Nigeria was before now metallic but today it is glassy which should signpost the transparency of the democracy. However, the glass itself becomes a symbol of the cryptic and abstruse nature of the Nigerian democracy; the government has remained ossified since independence. In describing the new features in the Swahili novel, Said Khamis articulately captures the thematic concerns of the recent Nigerian novel:

Thematically, the new novel is inward looking, showing ... 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).

The novelist is without doubt a representative of the people at large and their story is the story of the people. Helen Chukwuma states that the novelist does more than simple story telling 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 Nigerian novelist is not just a mere story teller or observer, his art according to Dan Izevbaye, “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 effect on men of the culture they have created” (17).

II

Though the thrust of this discourse is to define a new sub-genre within the tradition of the Nigerian novel, its purpose is not to strictly pursue a feminist reading of the texts chosen for analysis, yet it cannot appraise the texts outside the feminist context, most especially as the novels are women-centered and they explore women’s experience in both the traditional and

contemporary societies. 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 their major areas of abode in the novels, since the environment in which they find themselves influences their worldviews at any given time.

The existential bearings of the novels pieced together with the progressive metamorphosis of the characters from a state of ignorance to cognition aptly illustrates that the novels are a *Bildungsroman*, a novel 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 capture the features of the coming-of-age theme. One of the peculiarities of the *Bidungsroman*, 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 *Bidungsroman*” (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. Consequently, both the hero and the reader benefit from this education" (15).

Bildungsroman is the literary label affixed to novels that particulate 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 Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's *Wilham 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 explicates 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 impervious to new ideas he has gained from unprescribed 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 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.

However, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the *Bildungsroman* presents to the reader “the image of man in the process of becoming” (19), he situates and particularizes its protagonist on the threshold between different historical eras. “[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 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, animated 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 trigger off the polemics as the editors articulately demonstrate their resentment for Buckley’s seemingly innocuous taxonomic definition of the *Bildungsroman*, which omits female experience from the genre. Hirsch and Rosowski present alternate models which no doubt alternates 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 exploring their feminity and initiate a process to rupture the gender tension. Rita Felski argues in her essay “The Novel of Self-Discovery” against the grain of feminist criticism when she refuses to condemn the *Bildungsroman* with its emphasis on integrative development as necessarily 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 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 machinery for this discourse.

III

Although African writers especially Nigerian novelists are not conscious practitioners of the *Bildungsroman*, most African novels especially francophone Africa, conveniently fall within this tradition. For example Ellie Higgins identifies some Senegalese novels as narratives of growing-up as a *leit-motif*, which eloquently falls within the traditions of the *Bildungsroman*:

[the] narrative of development functions like a social novel which probes the influences of modern development on urban Senegal's youth. The narratives also recall other Senegalese *Bildungsroman*, or narratives that trace the development of a young protagonist. *Picc Mi's* Moduo serves as an interesting comparison and contrast to Samba Diallo, the *taalibe* protagonist in Senegalese author Cheikh Hamadou Kane's novel *L'aventure ambiguë*. In Kane's novel, Samba Diallo leaves his *daara* – and his future as an Islamic leader – in order to study in Paris. Like other West African *Bildungsroman* such as Camara Laye's *L'enfant Noir* or Aminata Sow Fall's *L'appel des arènes*, *L'aventure ambiguë* mourns the effect of a French education in Africa: alienation from African culture (58).

The female *Bildungsroman* has four distinct characteristics. In order to understand why the

novels, *Purple Hibiscus*, *Sky-High Flames* and *Everything Good Will Come* fit so well in the category of the female *Bildungsroman*, the discourse must define the paradigm and clarify what makes up this focused sub-genre.

First, there is the awakening, when the character becomes aware that her condition of life limits her aspirations for the future. She begins to display tendencies of her 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 questioning her values 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 concludes 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 *Bildungsroman* follows 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 short hand 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 his/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 funless world, their Calvinistic father has designed for them. Their fussy mercantile father

builds a world that lacks ventilation, which guarantees a steady relationship with the outside when the inside becomes too suffocating. The narrative is woven around Palm Sunday, yet the development of the protagonist and her brother has a quadrilateral dimension; their home in Enugu, school, church and Nsukka. The latter has the most amazing effect on their developmental process. Adichie describes her setting with unpretentious fidelity. Kambili's home is very typical of children from the class of aristocracy, yet they are empty psychologically. Kambili is alienated socially, culturally and psychologically from everyone around her, except her brother, 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 overwhelms and inundates her psychological development rather than elevates and animates it.

Her father's personality and presence in the home continue to truncate any seeming emotional and psychological stability; she builds up naturally from the inside. Eugene, Kambili's father, is a religious maverick and his bigoted belief is founded on the theological standards of Catholicism. He leads a life of Rosary and Crossing and carries himself with a donnish air of Catholic superiority. His over-zealous attitude and clipped religious tones dwarf members of his family. He works hard to ensure his family lacks nothing. His houses are capacious yet stifling, and the bedrooms are 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 and suffocating apartment which is devoid of life, the

apartment sits on its own. Its description no doubt 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 true 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, what emerges is a blaring silence. Invariably the most important aspect of her transition or rites of passage is the quest for voice. If she must attain voice, she must transcend and traverse her geographical limitations. Eugene owns a conglomerate, one is a publishing house reputed for its astuteness and unbiased reportage of the Nigerian political situation, and above all its antipathetic posture 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 are atrophying by the day because of the air of machismo around the house. Silence in Eugene’s home is magnified to the extent that it is palpable.

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 she is chauffeur – driven home. Her classmates deconstruct this as aristocratic arrogance. They are unaware that her life is dictated and regulated by a schedule scrolled in her heart. Eugene’s sense of

production evidences his personality as a capitalist, from time to time, as he comes home with new products from his factories to be assessed by his reticent family who have become so dopey in their pathetic state of taciturnity, created by his phallogocentrism.

This phallic and capitalist arrogance is extended to Kambili's education. Coupled with the sickening and choking home characterized by her father's sense of material acquisition, her academic business 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 academic business, he chides and asks a mechanical question. "How many heads has Chinwe Jideze?" – The girl who beats her to second position (Emphasis mine 46). He goes further to present a mirror to Kambili to ascertain the number of heads she has, for fear of being tortured, Kambili devices 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 placidly faulty, they are banal and plastic, hence Kambili turns the entire academic enterprise to cramming and calculation. Eugene's educational standards stress the training of the intellect without any complimentary ties with the emotion and imagination. To him 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 varied forms of silence. Kambili, Jaja and their mother speak with their spirit. Sometimes they converse with

their eyes. Kambili's mother hardly talks, when she does, it is in monosyllables. Pauline Ada Uwakweh observes:

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 device means of survival within the utilitarian calculus Eugene has created in their mind. One of the strategies is the domineering silence with which she observes situations and the other is a filial bonding. Through bonding, mother and children are able to survive the domestic quagmire and the prescriptions of the 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 glaring 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 for themselves. The constrictions and deprivations of Eugene's religious philosophy strengthen the bond even more, because when confronted with any form of adversity, they look inwards. Their homes become a fort 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 guest whenever they call. The journey towards the retrieval of her voice begins with what would have been the normal ritual of silence during Christmas celebration if her aunt Ifeoma had not

shown up with her family. The conservative mindset of their father makes them observe anything he labels as evil abominable to them without any rational or dialectical questioning. Kambili's doughty aunt, Ifeoma, becomes symbol of the iconoclastic identity and demystifier of patriarchal and despotic establishments. Though a Catholic devotee like Kambili's father, she creates the leeway that gives her brother's family leverage from domestic servitude.

Following Kambili's acknowledgement of her limitations as a child, which marks the beginning of her awakening, she begins the struggle of overcoming the pains of realizing that she is voiceless, which makes her abnormal, as Ifeoma's children observe, and this places her outside the social ideal. This awakening leads to the introduction of the second characteristic of the female *Bildungsroman* – guidance from a network of strong women. Her mother lacks the propensity to protect her from Eugene's incessant battery, even when it is without justification. What Kambili's mother does is merely nurse her back to health after regular battery. Her character is weak and for Kambili to grow up a stable woman she needs more than a nurse.

The character of Ifeoma has threefold effect on Kambili. She is first of all the maternal figure that offers guidance to Kambili. She helps Kambili distinguish between right and wrong through her religious beliefs, and she helps her find her rhythm and balance in a society that is unbalanced by asymmetric gender configuration. Second, Kambili sees her as a woman that is self-reliant in a male-dominated society. Third, she both mothers and fathers her children. 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 the access to assess the culinary site. This aspect of her apprenticeship is important, since Kambili is looking for role models as she transitions from being a child 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 a crutch in a society where men god everything, Ifeoma provides a unique insights into the role of the emancipated African woman.

Socially, Ifeoma is well positioned but she does not intimidate others with her position 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 uninvited guests. Regardless of her brother's social position – an aristocratic, rich man, she is able to hold back. She does not beg him for anything even when she lacks it. It is not because 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 chiseled up roles” (30).

The process of creating her own voice begins with Kambili's location of her mouth, which has been in a perpetual state of passivity. Ifeoma's presence in Aba during the Christmas celebration is fumigating, because the vector of silence that has clipped Kambili's lips and the cyst shielding rays of humanity from her life begins to shade into a mincing voice.

Eugene only grants his children audience with their grandfather for fifteen minutes. Anything more is abominating and 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

cartographed in their mind. Kambili observes her grandfather with filial attachment from a distance because she has been zipped up by her father's doctrinaire stance towards Papa Nnukwu, which is informed by Kambili's father's inebriated sense of religion.

Ifeoma is able to easily discern the cosmetic life her callow nephew and niece are leading. She observes that Kambili's expressions are glacial unlike her children who have plenary rights to converse inside and outside their home. In order to initiate an osmotic pressure in their lives, she prescribes a trip to Nsukka, for Kambili and Jaja. A trip that marks an eclipse of 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 and their mainstay.

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

For Kambili, Nsukka not only represents a town where her aunt leaves but a symbol of liberty as the concluding chapter evidences. 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 man, thereby disproving and

debunking her father's stony fundamentalism. For the very first time she lives a life not dictated by schedule, though the items in the schedule are concretely engraved in her heart, Ifeoma consigns her nephew's and niece's schedules and customizes 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 in 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 practise – one which makes room for dissent. Father Amadi discerns with relative ease that Kambili is gnomic; even though she is conditioned by the ritualized sense of religion her father has created in her psyche. He devices a means with which to wring her from her silent space. Since her sense of Catholicism is ritualistic, and Jesus or God becomes the common denominator, it becomes apparently glaring that, she will be willing to do anything provided it is associated with God or Jesus. Through this device Father Amadi cracks her frozen sense of comportment and broke through her programmed psychic networking. Father Amadi takes advantage of her dogmatic naivety as she falls for the bait and runs for it:

“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 cosset her, she beams her first smile. Though icy, it is a process towards voicing. On their way home, Kambili opens her mouth and laughs a mirthless laugh. As she develops psychologically under the tutelage of Father Amadi, she commits a cardinal sin,

through fraudulent 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, it 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 only begins to know him. Her aunt's children and Jaja seem to be closer to him but she is too distant – a fact she hates herself for. 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 sacred painting as 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 journey to Nsukka. One such change, though unprecedented, is Jaja's unpretentious demand for the key to his room. Eugene becomes astounded by this demand and decides to take pragmatic and overt steps to ensure he unteaches his children that have been dislocated from the borderline of 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 temperament of the air of Ifeoma's home. Eugene bathes Kambili's feet in hot water, eliciting screams of pain. The cleansing ritual yields a less than proportionate return because it did not produce the elutriating effects Eugene desires. The children bring two items from their aunt's; Jaja brings seeds of purple hibiscus while Kambili brings the uncompleted painting of their grandfather. Both items represent freedom from the rigid and despairing life style of their father's world. With these items they are to

sustain a steady link with their aunt's airy world en route liberation. With these prized possessions they hope never to plunge into the border of frustration, disillusionment, alienation, and the existential solitude of the world they know too well. The items will help them cram the vacuum created in their lives.

Kambili's father suddenly discovers her 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 at the same time. Stunned by this development, Eugene destroys the painting, Kambili is unable to hold back, she is not ready to watch her father tear something she holds sacred from her just like that – she had remained silent all her life. However, 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 at the same time the residual effects of her grandfather, which she never had while he was alive. She strings together the pieces of painting with alacrity and observes her father with a defiant air of an unequivocal expression of the rejection, condemnation and disintegration of the unproductive upbringing that her father has given her. The furtiveness with which she handles the painting embarrasses everything her father stands for. He becomes stunned at the confutation of his conservative religious standards – an occasion where he is completely subdued by the first shocking witness of the result of his rigid religious matrix; Kambili's handling of the pieces of the painting symbolizes the collapse of her father's system. Rather than realize and admit that his philosophy is inhuman and inefficacious, with a doleful expression on he degenerates into an uncontrollable fit of anger and spans Kambili into a state of unconsciousness. The trip to Nsukka becomes 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 earlier life. She is disinclined to acquiesce to the status quo – escaping from her entrapment, by debunking her father’s authority, a definitive statement of rebellion against the phallogentric and autocratic set up.

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 from poisoning Eugene. At the concluding chapter, she plays Fela tapes without any form of fear of contravening standards. She issues cheques to people as her will moves her. Fela symbolizes freedom of speech, fair play and justice. When Kambili visits her aunt on the first occasion, the kind of tapes Amaka airs are abominable to Kambili. Since she is now free, not because of her father’s death but because she has reached the pinnacle of her development, she can easily discern between good and bad. She need not be goaded to make decisions. Kambili discovers her selfhood as she evolves from what she has 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. The reader can now follow the growth of Kambili as she moves forward with her internal epiphanic awakening and watch her as she learns to be a mature woman, an aspect of the female *bildungsroman*.

IV

In *Sky-High Flames*, Unoma Azuah gives 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 (sic) everyone's needs but any minute spent by myself was called daydreaming (7).

From a very tender age Ofunne's destiny has been decided. She is to remain docile and inactive in the culinary site where her parents continue to restrain her in a supine position. Her upbringing is strictly domestic, in order that she fits or sizes the office of a chattel or becomes the object of the evening amusement of some man in the future. 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 her disaster, she psychologically maps out strategies for her liberation from the imposed state of inertia her parents intend to plunge her into. The leeway 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).

Hazal Carby amplifies Thompson's position on the importance of education, Carby 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, which in turn leaves the potentials of women grossly untapped. This is a 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, "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 dreams" (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 psychologised, people are not told what to do; they know what to do, because the gender geometry becomes the central plank of cultural life. Ofunne at a very tender age is able to resist attempts of the phallogocentric precepts of her society to reduce her to a marginal status, when she triumphs over the young boys who are supposed to be Iloba’s age mates at the river. 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, one will find many examples of attempts to socialize her at an early age into feminine 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 get the family going domestically she becomes accountable for whatever misery that springs from that failure. Thus, Iloba holds her responsible for his being late to school. By the time Ofunne leaves home for school, she has been partially domesticated; partially because her marginal status and the food office fail to leaven her life as a woman. Hence when her entrance result indicates she passed, she abandons the homestead with immediate alacrity.

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” (135), a domain 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. She hardly runs away because she usually comes back to that space of her limitation. Ifeoma creates the avenue for Kambili’s journey to Enugu, Enitan’s parents decide to send her abroad because of her involvement in Sheri’s rape, and Ofunne leaves her home solely for education.

School for Ofunne becomes a place of becoming. She is the favourite among the teachers and students, as she gradually learns to deal with the new environment. Sometimes, however, an occasional fit of eccentricity propels her into exciting troubles with fellow students and encounters with the head teacher of the school. Sister Dolan, the head teacher, is a true matriarch who understands the exuberance of teenagers and helps them develop. She becomes the symbol of inspiration for Ofunne, and a strong role model, as she begins her transition from childhood to womanhood.

Ofunne's future suffers a setback with the indisposition of her mother. She is collared into marriage and her quest for education is truncated as she follows Oko to Kaduna to live as a child-wife, where she enters and sustains herself in the social space of female silence once again. She continues to appear to disappear. Her school days seem to be the most eloquent and vibrant because that is the path to her liberation. Ofunne is stripped of her rights, which are supposed to be parental care and guidance. She is found guilty of being herself and 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 it instead of being supported by it" (182). Ofunne, for instance, is brought up by her parents whose intension is to marry her out when a suitor comes calling, regardless of her age and ambitions. Kambili is battered by her father. Enitan's parents are torn apart by matrimonial feud so that she hardly identifies with any of them. All those who should be nurturing them into womanhood continually demoralize these female characters. These characters are not stably growing up or being brought up, they are only tumbling up.

Ofunne's deflowering after her mock-marriage becomes an initiation from girlhood into womanhood; because she becomes adaptable to matrimonial life with ease immediately she is

deflowered, regardless of Oko's aberrant behaviour. Oko's promiscuity is abhorrent to her sense of decency. This sudden revelation, at most times irrigates the silence in the home. Matrimony for Ofunne gradually becomes an arduous enterprise because her husband refuses to make the enterprise savory. She becomes convinced of Oko's carnality and unbridled lubricity, as she reminisces on the steady gaze Oko gave her amply busted friend Uka on one of his visits to her school. The gaze is not just an amorous advance, but an amplification of the degree of his promiscuity. At this point, the novel floats around the existential themes of pain and exile. Out of frustration, Ofunne tries to return to the geography of her childhood through letters, when her state of loneliness and alienation deepen.

Taking her own expectations - which are regulated by her own society which is patriarchal – into consideration, Ofunne's circumstances only serves to sustain her growing lack of identity. She refuses to find tranquility in the only space in which society locates her; the kitchen where she spends her childhood. As Oko's wife, she has no choice but to size the kitchen, as it becomes her private domain. She circumvents the rules of the kitchen and attains power. Whenever Oko defaults, Ofunne regresses into a blaring 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 the culinary power, which she uses to curb her husband's excesses. Once he is found wanting, Ofunne refuses to cook for him. The kitchen becomes the hub for action in the novel, and it is from there Ofunne attracts her husband's attention. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili's mother uses the kitchen to a dangerous end, while Sheri, in *Everything Good Will Come*, uses it to control other characters, most especially since she is a consummate cook.

As Ofunne's pregnancy nears delivery, Oko decides to take her back home. Mariane

Hirsch contends that women hardly break family ties as easily as men irrespective of whatever offence is committed against them. Apart from that factor, this return 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" are marked by circularity – her 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" (141).

The novel climaxes as the full irresponsibility of Oko becomes glaring. The literary representation of women in urban environments often functions symbolically as loss of innocence – the pure daughter and mother of the village is reduced to being 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 evidences this. Though Ofunne experiences a stillbirth, she reaches the pinnacle of her development after the delivery. As Oko abandons her at his parents', she fights her way from her shackled state as she beats her mother-in-law up for her falsehood. Ofunne's development peaks as her crises lingers. Ofunne fails at every attempt to find meaning and purpose in her life. She is tormented by an existential discontent and disruption of selfhood, steaming from her privileged marginal position as eldest daughter.

Ofunne fails to create a purpose or an order in her life, and she abandons her belief in a God that denies her the possibility of purpose or order in her life. Her apprenticeship becomes whole when she replaces her Catholic God. She gains physical and spiritual freedom as she returns home. 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 cum religious loyalty. She abandons the Christian God, which is an extension of male dominance. Her parents gave her to Oko not only because they wanted money to meet their own 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 her parents sold her out in marriage. Her husband promises to allow her 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. She finally determines to find Sister Dolan and start afresh. She finds epiphany in her state of trance as she submits herself nude before Onishe.

Ifeoma, Sister Dolan, and Grace Ameh in *Everything Good Will Come* become moral and spiritual touchstones in the novels; they alone can help the protagonists find their true metal and their true identity.

V

This journey of self-discovery is important because of its significance for women in general. A woman should be able to pursue whichever career she desires without fear of criticism. Kambili and Ofunne emerge from their journeys as complete persons – heroines who have battled their inner dragons and triumphed. The greatest aspect of the journey, however, is that through the employment of this sub-genre, the reader no doubt has been able to accompany these girls and that is part of the relevance of the *bildungsroman*, the education of the reader.

These novels comprise a visible autobiographical propensity; Adichie and Atta seem to be describing the world around them, the events of their growing-up. *Everything Good Will Come*, though not discussed in this essay, and *Purple Hibiscus* become national allegories. The

novels capture the growing up of Enitan and Kambili, who try to hold things together in a rapidly changing Nigerian society, which automatically become narratives of a nation in transition, in the process of becoming and the struggle for dignity. The narratives are racy and compelling, so that you see yourself and Nigeria in a flux. Their stories become a national story, our story. These new voices actually describe the world around them – the events of their growing-up years. This is the perspective where they contrast with the first generation of writers, who described a world they had never really lived in.

One can easily see how the crisis of growing up in Nigeria compels these writers to use their gift of writing for psychological release. These novels in Nigeria seem to cling more to reality than those of the earlier generations. Jack Rawlings opines that, “fantasy has traditionally been a theater where the demands of the superego can be circumvented and one’s shadow be allowed to triumph” (669). Invariably, these writers seem to fantasize about reality. But their fiction is more than fantasy. The characters are too real to be fantastic, more tangible than memory. These writers, in many ways, successfully take up the plight of children by creating characters that attract attention and sympathy from the reader. These novels give children a voice that they desperately need, yet have never had before. The narratives usually begin with crisis; the concluding chapters, however, presage new beginnings. For example, *Everything Good Will Come* ends with, “The sun sent her blessings. My sweat baptised me” (340), *Purple Hibiscus* ends with a note of hope: “Above, clouds like dyed cotton wool hang low, so low I feel I can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them. The new rains will come down soon” (307), while *Sky-High Flames* ends thus, “I was going to start all over again. I would go back to school” (163). These voices are symbolic of hope for deprived individuals and a wounded society. After the regression and the return from what Obioma Nnaemeka describes as their “orphic journeys”

(154), these female characters become whole; armed and determined with the resolution to make functional the lessons they have learnt in the process of their *Bildung* and journeys in self-fulfilling manner.

These female writers achieve numerous goals in exhuming an almost forgotten genre to making a constructive and empowering statement. The *Bildungsroman* has proven to be a formidable and unparalleled success as a genre through which writers and critics alike can understand Nigerian society and Africa at large. But most importantly, the form has become a postcolonial index for calibrating the growth and development of the African continent with that of the protagonists of these narratives.

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