

KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW*: THE FEMINIST *BILDUNGSROMAN*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Kaine Agary adopts the German *Bildungsroman* form to question the socio-political challenges of her time. It argues that social conditions provoke a reworking of the genres convention to account for peculiar experiences. A close examination of the protagonist's process of maturation across geographical and social borders' emphasises the flexibility of the *Bildungsroman*. Exploring the female protagonist/novel allows the researcher to reveal the extent to which the selected text represents or reverses certain features of the *Bildungsroman*. The paper adopts Karen Horney's psychoanalytic social theory which is based on the assumption that apart from early childhood experiences, social and cultural conditions influence personality development. It argues for a close reading and analysis of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* as an example of contemporary feminist *Bildungsroman*. The findings above imply that the *Bildungsroman* has been re-constructed within third generation Nigerian context. However, there are other variations in the Nigerian *Bildungsroman* such as ethnic, dual and LGBTQ variations that need further academic exploration.

Key Words: *Bildungsroman*, Kaine Agary, Adolescence, Female, *Yellow-Yellow*, Niger-Delta

Introduction

Bildungsroman is a German term for novels that deal with the moral and psychological development of the main character as he transits from youth to adulthood. The word was first used by a German philologist, Karl Morgenstern to describe some German novels of which *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is the first example; and later popularised by Wilhelm Dilthey. Etymologically, *Bildung* connotes "formation", "portrait", "education, or "development" and "roman" means novel. *Bildungsroman* encompasses *Eziehungsroman* (novel of formal educational development), *Ertwicklungsroman* (novel of general growth and development), and *Kunstlerroman* which is a novel of artistic realisation (Thamarana 22). The form is distinguished by distinct some formal and thematic features and change is very essential. The goal is maturity, which the protagonist achieves gradually with much difficulty. The reader is involved in the process of education in that he follows the difficult journey of the protagonist and learns from it. *Bildungsroman* is primarily a narrative of male travel, exploration and socialisation.

Although female *Bildungsroman* is not a new concept, it did not receive scholarly attention until mid-20th century. Early female novelists such as Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, Sylvia Plath and Emily Bronte that wrote coming of age narratives alongside their male counterparts were overlooked and erroneously neglected. This is because the female developmental trajectory differs markedly from her male counterpart. According to Walter Collins, "Female characters abound in the *Bildungsroman*, but their existence ensures that the hero develops appropriately. Where they exist as major characters in the novel, their development is usually

marked by sacrifice and alienation as a process of becoming and developing” (25). The female variant calls for a re-negotiation of the defining features of the genre to include the female experience.

The pioneer essay on female *Bildungsroman* edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsh and Elizabeth Langland challenges the existing canon of male hegemony and establishes the issue of gender often termed “Fraueroman” (Pressman). MaryAnn Ferguson contends that male trajectory is linear, compared to the circular development of the female. The male achieves self-realisation after his psychological and spiritual journey in the world, while the female protagonist remains at home without the possibility to explore. Female characters who refuse to follow this order are perceived as rebels. Ferguson further states that since “literature reflects reality, novels portraying women as having the same capabilities to learn and develop as men began to see the light of the day in the 1970s when women started to challenge their confined roles and to join the “outside world” (*TheVoyageIn...* 229). Scholars and critics have observed the trend in recent Nigerian literature. According to Terhemba Shija, “Female writing and feminism have flourished in the 21st century Nigerian fiction more than in any era in Nigeria literary history” (5).

Cultural prejudice against women influenced literary production on female *Bildungsroman* in Nigerian literature. Novels of female development emerged with Second generation of Nigerian female novelists such as Buchi Emecheta and Zaynab Alkali who explore the growth process of their protagonists. Early Nigerian *Bildungsromane* differs from the contemporary form in narrative structure, content and socio-political context. Third generation Nigerian novelists write mostly from the diaspora about their peculiar experiences. Thus, they illustrate various characteristics of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Unlike their European counterparts and literary mothers, their protagonists challenge the values of their societies rather than personify them. Their novels lack harmonious reconciliation between the individual and the society, but emphasises the possibility of another journey for the protagonist.

Bildungsroman features in Nigerian literature are not clearly defined. Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s criteria is the reference point for most English *Bildungsromane*. However, Ogaga Okuyade argues for, and develops an understanding of what constitutes a *Bildungsroman* in postcolonial African female novels into four distinct categories thus:

First, there is an awakening from which 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. Second, the main character gains self-awareness through a network of women, who guide and support her in becoming self-reliant in a patriarchal society. Third, the character explores her femininity and begins to redefine her identity. she journeys into adulthood. Finally, as the character reaches the point of maturity and independence, she takes control of her transition or journey of self-discovery (“Weaving...” 146)

Okuyade agrees that this is not a blue print since third generation Nigerian novelists seem to be content with indigenisation of the form with modifications and variations to reflect the reality of Nigeria as a failed state. Nevertheless, this defining criteria along with other critical works will be significant to this study.

Yellow – Yellow: The Feminist Bildungsroman

Esther Labovitz defines the female *Bildungsroman* to mean “a narrative which follows a female protagonist from adolescence to maturity focusing, mainly on friendship and family, education, and career, love and marriage. Unlike her male counterpart, the heroine grows under completely different circumstances. Her *Bildung* functions from her life experience rather than from lessons to be learned” (246). *Yellow–Yellow* follows Laye in a linear progression of the typical *Bildungsroman* novel. The narrative begins in adolescence and follows the protagonist as she transits from her poor, unnamed Ijaw village to the city. Agary deliberately removes male power and authority in order to enhance the female *Bildung*. Thus, *Yellow-Yellow* is a novel of various awakenings for the protagonist which will be explored under the themes of relationship, education, love, role models and a journey of self-discovery.

Relationship

Yellow–Yellow lacks patriarchal presence and authority. Although *the* story does not begin in childhood, relationship is given full attention in the novel. From the beginning of the narrative, figure of the father is non – existent. Curiosity about her absent father becomes psychologically traumatic and the cause of basic anxiety with disastrous effect on Laye. She is compelled to seek her father from her relationship with men. This is what Horney describes as the need for affection or moving towards people. Following her awakening to this limitation, Laye develops faulty coping strategies. When she sees a man of similar skin colour for the first time, the repressed desire for a father resurfaces. She states: “seeing this man brought the thought of my father, where is he? Did he ever come back to Nigeria? Did he ever think of my mother? Would I ever know him if I saw him? I had no clue what my father looks like” (Agary 19). When she meets the sixty – one-year-old admiral in Port Harcourt, she again sees a father figure in him and begins to draw closer in order to know what it feels to have a father. Laye states: “In my eyes he looked so dignified, if I had the luxury of creating a dream father, he would definitely come out looking like Admiral” (Agary 120).

Bibi proves to be over protective, loving, caring but strict. She seeks to protect her daughter from falling into similar situations, as she has done. When Laye questions Bibi about her father, she responds: “Have I not taken good care of you? Why are you asking of your father? (Agary19).Occasionally, Bibi allows Laye to only Mama Ebiye. When it is time to leave her mother, her village and her past behind. Laye feels that an important part of her life is missing. She states: “I was afraid to leave the comfort of all that I had known for seventeen years to start a life in a new place without my mother, who had been my protector, my shield, and who would have been, if she could breathe for me, my life support” (Agary41).This is atypical of the *Bildungsroman* which requires that the child is motivated to leave home as a result of strained relationship with parents. Laye eventually leaves her village for an independent life in the city. She is not driven by an urgent need to leave her only parent, since the relationship between them is not problematic. She is forced to migrate because of poor living conditions and environmental degradation. Horney believes that basic anxiety can result from unfriendly environment which can affect the mental growth of the individual (*Neurosis* 41).

Education

Bibi, Sisi, Lolo and the Admiral stress the importance of female education in the novel. Agary seems to say that lack of education is probably the cause of the lingering crises in the Niger Delta. Bibi learns from experience that education is the key to self – emancipation. She works hard to pay for Laye’s education. According to Laye: “My mother used to tell me that I would be better than her, that as long as I am educated, I would be able to take care of myself She said it with all conviction and made so many sacrifices to make sure I went to school” (Agary9). Bibi repeatedly advises Laye: “Your books should be your best friends” (Agary 78). Bibi accedes to her daughter’s request because she hopes that Laye will acquire a degree in the city and fulfill her wish that she becomes a university graduate.

Upon Laye’s meeting with Sisi and Lolo in Port Harcourt, her interest in education is rekindled. This time, the decision to be a graduate is not just for her mother’s sake, but she says, “being around her (Lolo) made me want to continue my education and not because I want to please my mother. I just want to carry myself with confidence as Lolo” (Agary 83). Sisi, helps her out of her psychological trauma and identity crises: “you don’t know your father and you can’t do anything about that. Focus on the things you have control over, and get your education. If you do that no one can take your future away from you because your father is not around. Do you understand?” (Agary101). Sisi highlights education as a strategy for overcoming racial discrimination, prejudice and identity crises. She continues: “it is important to have that paper in your hand, my dear ...if you don’t have your degree, it will be hard for you” (Agary 69).

The Admiral observes that Laye is an intelligent adolescent with a bright future. In a discussion with Laye on the situation of the Niger Delta region, he points out, “that is why you must go to school and get your degree so that no one has an excuse not to give you an opportunity in life” (Agary137).

Love

Love plays a significant role in the heroine’s spiritual and emotional formation. In Buckley’s list of fixed features, ordeal by love is prominent. The protagonist experiences two fundamental love affairs, of which one ends negatively. The first experience is painful and disappointing while the second leads to satisfaction. Agary adopts the theme of love affairs, but, contrary to the tradition, love affairs in *Yellow – Yellow* are debasing. Laye does explore her femininity by engaging in love affairs with two men, Sergio and Admiral. Her sexual awakening begins with an innocent kiss from a classmate in primary school. She relates the experience while comparing the kiss to that of Sergio, her white lover (Agary 27).

The first encounter between the two occurred in a rural setting. Laye could not allow him go beyond kissing. Though, she stops his hand from exploring under the skirt of her dress, she cherishes that kiss and sees Sergio as the leeway out of her entrapment in the village. Sergio’s disappearance without warning provokes Laye to seek alternate strategies of escape from the village. When Sergio resurfaces in Port Harcourt, Laye accepts his sexual advances out of curiosity. She says:

I did not need Sergio in the same way anymore, yet I was a bit curious about what it would be like being with a white. There could have been something they offered besides money, that thing my mother has fallen for. It was that thing I had been looking for. I had wanted to understand what it was besides money that made beautiful twenty - year – old girls look at their short, fat, ugly fifty – eight – year – old

white husband with so much affection. Maybe then, I could understand better or with less anger why there were more and more of my kind – “African – profits”, “born – troways,” ashawo – pikin”, “father – unknowns”, - running around the slums of Port Harcourt. Maybe then I would not hide from the facts of my birth that my yellow skin and curly hair put on display. (Agary 171)

It is with the Admiral that Laye experiences her first love relationship. He is the first person she desires to spend her life with. Laye begins a secret romantic affair with the old man who took her virginity and lavishes her with expensive gifts and money. Her deflowering marks her initiation into womanhood. Her attraction to him is not for financial gains. She states: “I was hoping that the relationship would give me a taste of close paternal affection that I never had” (Agary 138). According to Horney, the Admiral is neurotic in that he “exploits others without regard for their feeling” (*Neurosis* 199). Admiral takes undue advantage of her naivety and craving for a father figure to exploit her sexually. Laye becomes entangled in a similar web that caught her mother.

The Admiral pretends to be a saviour to Laye and the entire Ijaw people. Laye recalls that her indiscretion is a terrible mistake that will cause loss of the luxury she has come to know in Port Harcourt. Her search for the absent father in Sergio and Admiral results in pregnancy that she cannot attribute to any of them. She aborts the fetus the traditional way and decides to focus on her education as a form of rebirth. Laye’s period of pregnancy through abortion is a time of acceptance, self-appraisal and self-discovery.

Role Models

According to Okuyade, “the main character gains self-awareness through her relationship with a network of women, who guide and support her in becoming self – reliant. This network provides the character with moral guidance in the face of adversity” (“Trying” 10). Bibi, Sisi and Lolo provide Laye with positive guidance and support throughout the narrative. Emem, Laye’s co-receptionist, functions as a negative mentor. In the rural setting, Bibi provides her daughter with protection, guidance and support. Although she learns from her mistakes, she tries to protect Laye from the prying eyes of male predators. She successfully fathers and mothers her daughter and remains single in order to concentrate on Laye’s upkeep.

In the city, Laye finds positive role models in Sisi and Lolo who are of the elite class. They enlighten her on how to survive in the city. Laye identifies first with Sisi, whose skin colour is similar to hers. Sisi is rich and generous. She provides luxury, comfort, accommodation and tutors her to work hard. Lolo has the strongest influence on Laye. She is a twenty – five-year-old university graduate who refuses a permanent job with ELF. She prefers running her own business ventures which take her all over the world. She is rich, economically independent and very industrious. Sisi hands Laye over to Lolo for proper mentoring. Laye states: “I saw a future of me in the likeness of Lolo and that pleased me” (Agary 52). While Sisi offers Laye comfort and maternal affection, Lolo gives her a sisterly companionship. Laye learns under the pressure and scrutiny of two women who she so desperately wanted to impress (Agary 67). Lolo finds Laye a job in Royal Hotel and expects that she will save for a degree and send money home to her mother.

Journey of Self Discovery

Laye is the prototype of the traditional *Bildungsroman* who grows up in the rural area and travels to the city as part of education. According to Felski, travel is an essential element in the *Bildungsroman*. Laye's journey is motivated by unfavourable environmental conditions. Horney believes that "the human individual needs favourable conditions for growth...a healthy friction from the wishes and will of others" (*Neurosis* 18). Laye experiences social and intellectual constraints in the village as she points out that "The sameness of life in the village would kill me if I did not escape" (Agary 10). Secretly, she begins to map out her strategies of escape. She considers several options, including the ones her mother would never approve of.

Mama Ebiye and Pastor Ikechukwu facilitate Laye's transition to Port Harcourt where she experiences various forms of awakening. She learns that her colour is not unique. She discovers different generations of yellows with similar skin colour as her own such as Sisi and Emem. Laye becomes aware and accepts the condition of her existence. She says "I never thought of the circumstances of my existence until I got to Port Harcourt" (Agary 73).

Laye adopts Emem's attitude: "it did not matter what people thought of me because of my complexion. I had to accept that I could not change the attitude of every person who saw my colour and judge me before they knew anything about me. It was not easy getting to that resolution" (Agary 75). She wonders why and how in the midst of everything, Sisi is successful despite the colour of her skin. She slowly appreciates the fact that knowing or not knowing her father would not release her from the society's judgment. She states: "the realization was comforting ... even though I know that my obsession over my father's whereabouts would not end." (Agary 101). Sisi and Emem tutor Laye to overcome the challenge of colour inferiority and discrimination.

Laye has reached the pinnacle of her development. She can now discern between right and wrong. She decides to take her destiny in her hands and promises herself that she must return to her mother's dreams and put her knowledge to proper use. The reader follows Laye through her growth from the stage of naivety to awareness. Laye makes the following resolutions:

I promised God and myself that I would focus only on completing my education and make my mother, Sisi and Lolo proud of me. As much as I enjoyed the drama of working at the hotel, I knew in my heart that it was not what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted the confidence that Lolo had, and if Sisi was right, the choices also that came with an education ... I need to refocus, and this time I would have to do it myself (Agary 177).

The novel climaxes as Laye induces her abortion and takes the position of a baby about to be born. she states: "I Lay curled up in the fetal position on the cold tile floor until my sweat and the blood that gushed from between my legs drenched my cloths" (Agary 177). To gain total physical and psychological freedom, according to Labovitz, the protagonist must go through the process of shedding. Shedding means, ridding oneself of familial bonds, self – hatred and burdens. For Laye, shedding involves severing all ties with Admiral, Sergio and Emem. Her personal journey and rebirth coincides with that of her country, Nigeria. Laye emerges from her journey as a mature individual. She seems to have found peace in her life. She has reached maturity psychologically after what Buckley calls "painful soul – searching" (17). *Yellow – Yellow* ends with a strong determination to succeed in life.

Conclusion

Yellow – Yellow celebrates the female variant of the *Bildungsroman*. The novel follows the female quest in that the protagonist is a female who emerges from her journey as an ideal protagonist. The story portrays the heroine on a continuous process of becoming. Agary's protagonist is describing the world around her and the challenges of her growing up years. The narrative begins with the predicament of the individual; the concluding parts predict a fresh start for the protagonist and her nation. *Yellow – Yellow* ends thus: "if I lived. It will be an opportunity for a personal rebirth along with Nigeria" (Agary177). The readers also experience their own development as they follow the narrative and learn from the mistakes of the protagonist.

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