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## Conformity, Consciousness and Growth in Northern Nigerian Fiction: A Bildungsroman Study of Zaynab Alkali's *Invisible Borders* and Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba*

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### Abstract

*The transformation an individual undergoes, from one growth stage to another plays a significant role in the life of the individual themselves, as well as the people in their immediate community. A form of novel that is concerned with the central characters's development, especially of mind and character, from childhood to maturity is referred to as bildungsroman. A study of Invisible Borders and Habiba by Zaynab Alkali and Razinat Muhammed respectively provide the reader with an insight into how ordinary individuals (specifically children) struggle to make meaning out of the contemporary world. The study is focused on how the chosen authors achieve this through, among other things, marriage, culture and love. The extent to which both writers embrace and depict the bildungsroman idea especially in the contemporary African setting, is examined using the Bildungsroman as a conceptual framework. This is to show how the writers have added to the trumpet blowing of creative writing especially with contemporary themes and styles in order to enlighten the people on the relevance of such features to the literary world in particular and the society at large. The research finds that marriage, love and education are among the glaring tools employed by both writers to achieve the Bildungsroman style. They are also the tools used to educate the society on the importance of educating a female child.*

**Keywords:** Bildungsroman, Culture, Female, Love, Child, Marriage

### Introduction

The child's various stages of growth as well as development both psychologically and physically are influenced by their social environment. What the people surrounding the child do alongside with what they say play a significant role in forming the child's mind and character. The influence of the environment on the child is starkly brought out in the Yoruba adage: "words of our elders are words of wisdom". The child's mindset, therefore, begins to form at a very tender age when they begin to become conscious of their surroundings. It is during this period of child's growth that their parents, peers and associates become mentors and role models. However, their ability to reason and be able to sieve between what is right and what is wrong takes a longer time. The attention of this paper is focused on the German concept, 'bildungsroman' which Abrams and Harpham define as "the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences ... into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (229). Specifically, the female child's character development becomes very vital because she grows up to become the first educator of the child, regardless of the gender. In some parts of Africa, the female child is culturally seen as a weak and dependable fellow who solely relies and is governed by

the decisions and judgments of either her father or another man to make meaning out of life. The literary world was not left behind as the early writings that included the bildungsroman style paid attention to male protagonists. It is this false claim that writers like Alkali and Mohammed, stand to debunk, as they present the readers with insightful views on the (female) child's formation of mind and character. The view of Camilla Brandstrom Autumn validates this concern:

The predominant focus on the male protagonist in the bildungsroman genre has provoked critics to offer a re-definition of the genre, claiming that the female protagonist's development differs in significant ways from the traditionally expected course of development.... (2)

Brandstrom's view above becomes relevant here as it claims the position of women in the society at large and the literary world in particular. The reason for the selection of these novels is because both novels are contemporary texts that seem yet to enjoy any critical study through bildungsroman lenses. This is in relation to Ogaga Okuyade's observation of the "bildungsroman" (141) being extensively studied in the West but not in Africa. In addition, this research adds to the struggle of the ordinary individuals especially in the rural area, where lack of exposure is still making them to live in the dark ages where exploitation remains the order of the day. The analysis focuses on specific individuals' growth that is metaphoric to the contemporary northern Nigerian society. Apollos Amoko in Aghogho argues that 'the postcolonial African Bildungsroman emerged, like its European predecessors, during times of radical transformation and social upheaval when, in the wake of colonialism, the traditional ways of being were seriously undermined, if not forever transformed (8). However, there exists a variation between the African bildungsroman and the western traditional bildungsroman as Ogaga explains that, "the African coming-of-age narrative does not emphasize self-realization and the harmonious reconciliation between protagonist and his society as the prototypical Western Bildungsroman does. Instead, it expresses a variety of forces that inhibits or prevents the protagonist from achieving self-realization". These forces include exile or dislocation, problems of transcultural interaction, poverty, and difficulty in preserving personal, familial, and cultural memories (12). For instance, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* depicts the life of a female protagonist who at the age of ten suffers in the hands of her aunt yet doesn't relent and later tries to differentiate between what seem right and what seem wrong while in boarding school where she spends eight years. Her struggle after acquiring education to become self-reliant has led her to find her relatives, wealth and love that result to marriage and signals a brighter future ahead. On the other hand, Razinat T. Mohammed's *Habiba* unveils the life struggle of a thirteen-year-old girl, Habiba. Her family problem has denied her proper parental upbringing and education and has exposed her father's abject poverty and huge debt that results to her early marriage to a man old enough to be her grandfather. Though there are variations in the depiction and presentation of the bildungsroman character in both the European and

the African novels as suggested in the arguments above, the unanimous concentration on the central character's development becomes the key idea uniting the works.

In relation to this, some 21<sup>st</sup> century African writers specifically Nigerian writers whose themes borrows from various postcolonial issues and styles have accommodated the bildungsroman style to see the pros and cons surrounding the coming of age of the protagonist as it reflects their society. Here, we have the likes of Chris Abani, Zaynab Alkali, Sefi Attah, Helon Habila, Doreen Baingana, Razinat Mohammed, Azizah Idris, among others.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The research intends to employ the *Bildungsroman* concept to decode the chosen texts. Though of German origin, *Bildungsroman* style became pronounced in England and the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the novel became popularized. It is a form of writing that focuses on the major character's growth, both physically and psychologically from childhood to a period of maturity. According to Simhachalam Thamarana "the growth and maturity occur according to specific pattern: so the sensitive, intelligent protagonist generally leaves home and undergoes stages of conflicts and growth, he or she is tested by crises and love affairs and then finally finds the best place to use his/ her unique talents" (22). Johann von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* was the first novel that is said to have captured the *Bildungsroman* in Germany. However, British authors like Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, James Joyce and George Eliot have captured it in their works too. Though at its appearance, it seem patriarchal in nature as it focused more on the male protagonist, the turn out of the feminist critics on the concept has changed the dimension as women kept agitating for self-development. This is because authors like Charlotte Bronte, Doris Lessing among others have echoed the style by focusing on female protagonists in their works. Camilla Brandstorm describes this expansion as "a far cry from traditional definitions, which focused exclusively on the development of the male hero, the Bildungsroman genre has expanded to include the development of first the white female protagonist, then also non-white" (11).

In addition, Ogaga has highlighted four features for identifying the female Bildungsroman: i. The awakening signaling the character's conscious of her limitations, ii. The self-awareness stage where the character begins to relate with others for guidance and protection, iii. The exploring and redefining stage showing the character's ability to choose her identity, iv. Maturity stage where the character takes total control of own journey and discovers self (145-146). This study is anchored upon these four features for a proper analysis of selected texts as bildungsroman.

### **Conformity in Writers**

Though both writers are from northern Nigeria, Alkali's works have received more critical attention than Mohammed's. This is because Alkali started writing

earlier in the third wave while Mohammed emerged in the later part of the same wave. For both writers, the socio-cultural milieu faced by people, especially women in the time and place has led to their redefinition of the woman's role especially in the northern Nigeria. They can both be seen as postcolonial African writers concerned with the "radical transformation and social upheaval" of the ordinary individual. While Alkali's perception on women has gone beyond the rural environment as her works presently focus on female characters struggling to compete with their male counterparts to make meaning out of life, Mohammed's is still with the rural women that are culturally being exploited by their families for been born women.

Mohammed does an examination of Alkali's female characters and concludes that Alkali is concerned with creating awareness and consciousness among women. Abdu describes Alkali's goal in *Invisible Borders* as that of tailoring the differences that inevitably exist among people as she identifies the differences, 'blend and render the borders invisible in the design and ultimate impact of creative writings" (4). In addition, Saleh does a Postcolonial Reading of Alkali's *Invisible Borders* as she presents the writer as a peaceful ambassador who tries to reunite culture, ethnicity and religion. Inuwa explores the "achanthion image of women" in Mohammed's *A Love like a woman's and other stories* by identifying the African women as subalterns marginalized by colonialism and men at the same time. Abubakar uses Mohammed's *Habiba* to interrogate some socio-cultural issues troubling the Northern Nigerian society. Jarome Tarepase on his part, attempts an examination of the Linguistic choices and Gender roles in Alpha Emeka's *The Carnival* (qtd. in Tarepase) and Razinat Mohammed's *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories* where he finds that Mohammed presents "female characters in position of servitude, perhaps to press home the point that African women are marginalized, deprived and oppressed" (144). Though a lot has been said on both authors, little or no attention has been paid to the protagonist development from childhood to maturity.

### Exploring the Bildungsroman Style

According to Ralph Austen, Bildungsroman in Africa can be described as a "a model of individualist reflection of possibilities of self-reflection through inherited culture, formal education and within a specific context" (215). This signals an ordinary individual's struggle with the environment as well as people surrounding them for a period of time.

Borrowing from Ogaga's distinct schema, let us examine Alkali's major character Safia. Safia, through a flashback, is depicted as an individual at her tender age. According to Alkali, "Safia was a restless six-year-old. For her, it was the period of consciousness-awakening. The age she realised she was a person with an identity and had begun to assert herself" (12). This narration is completely in accord with Ogaga's "awakening" stage. It is at such an age that a child becomes conscious and sensitive to their environment. Children begin to reason and select their likes and dislikes. Safia's conversation with her father brings out this point in very clear terms: "...the urchins fled in terror, but Safia stood her ground ...she stared boldly back....

She refused to give up. I am not your grandfather. Go and play with Yoksa Sibwong. noooo! (13-14).

The pleasure she derives from playing with her father gives her satisfaction and joy, so she refuses to let go despite her father's advice. The persistent insistence on playing with her father indicates the extent to which Safia can go in order to get happiness. She feels discontented with her friends and tries to find pleasure in her dad.

### **Love and the Protagonist**

According to the English Dictionary, love is an intense feeling of affection and care towards another person. Alkali uses it as an instrument for achieving the bildungsroman style. Safia's love for Sam at first sight indicates her period of realisation. A period in which a child starts differentiating between what they like and hate, between what is wrong and right, hence a period of advancement and transformation. "She thought she had never seen a boy that handsome before. He was barely ten years, chubby face, slender limbs... she had found herself a new playmate" (15). Here, we see an innocent child's thinking been preoccupied by the love of a "man-child". It's not as if Sam is the only handsome boy in the village, but none of the boys ever attracts Safia's attention. He is the first and only person that attracts Safia at the moment she starts making sense of her environment. The feelings she has for Sam has so much preoccupied her thinking that she finds her environment, like the orchard, uninteresting and her "peers boring". This shows the psychological transformation in Safia. She seems not to derive pleasure in her peers and other activities like before, she has been engaged in other activities, specifically love. The thought of this young man engulfed Safia's psychological development and thinking for some time without his acknowledgement. The support she gets from her dad for choosing Sam as her life partner serves as her moral guidance towards moving in the right direction.

However, Safia's dreams and thinking become shattered after her grandfather informs her of the tragedy that befalls Sam. Though she refuses to accept the tragedy in the first place, Sam's behaviour discourages her and gives her good reason to believe her father. In her sense of reasoning, Safia is presented as a person who does not easily jump to conclusion. Alkali explains that:

it was then the full impact of what the old men were saying hit her hard on the face. What had just happened? Her man and best friend, Sam, had just slipped from her fingers. They had made a pact...the pain around the region of her heart tightened until she could no longer breathe...she let out a heart-rending cry...a cry of a mortally wounded animal. (40-41)

It is here that the reader is exposed to Safia's way of expressing and handling disastrous situations. At her age, she is able to listen, think and make sense of the words of her elders, especially concerning her marriage with Sam. The cry she lets

out signals the pain the situation has put her into. This justifies Thamarana's view above on the protagonist been tested by love crises.

As Safia grows and advances into the wider world, she is able to transform herself from a mere village girl to a medical doctor through the education she acquires. The love encounter she earlier has does not affect her study. Later on, Safia becomes engulfed by the love of Sam and Sufyan, a politician and a medical doctor respectively. This is because Safia:

had an agreement with her suitor to inform and discuss with her people before he paid them a visit ... now what was she to report to him, that instead of discussing their lives together, she had accepted to see Sam? The result of this trip had been as exciting as it was worrisome. She was now as confused as ever. (57-58)

From all indications, Safia loves Sam more than Sufyan as she describes Sufyan's love as "... entirely different from her childhood feelings for Sam. There was no youthful exuberance...just calm serenity" (61). However, the obstacles and hedges she encounters as she struggles to make Sam her life partner leads to their separation. She doesn't just love Sam, the attachment he has with her people fosters their bond and she finds it hard to let go. She keeps promoting the love that unites them, even in her conversation with Sufyan:

Are you going to marry him then?' Again, she could only nod. Are you sure? 'Yes, I am absolutely sure'. This time she raised her head and looked him in the eyes. He saw happiness here and his heart sunk... 'you are obviously happy and that's what is important. (74)

Here, the author tries to show how love plays with Safia's intelligence in making choice between two young men. However, Safia could only realise the difference between appearance and reality later and this helps in molding her heart towards choosing the right partner. As a child, Safia is overshadowed by Sam's love and this emotion engulfs her to the university. As events unfold themselves, she realises that they are not meant for each other, thus, signaling a moment of redefining role and identity taking. The decision Safia takes in handling the problem and ending the relationship shows the level of her maturity. For instance, when Aisatta visits her in school, she does not fight her back, rather, she just offers her breakfast and asks Sam's driver who has come to carry her to the village to convey Aisatta and her child to Abuja and forget the journey to the village.

This displays exactly a mature way of handling issues. Though she is seriously hurt from the inside, she does not turn aggressive or lose her temper in the eyes of the public. She simply informs Aisatta of the plan to be conveyed to Abuja and "walked away". In her inner thoughts, Safia is seen making a comparison of her childhood self and her present self:



once, she was fifteen and had walked through a similar fire kindle by the same man. Cuddled by her family, she had cried her youthful heart out. Now she is twenty-six and could not cry. She al-ready knew what it felt to be betrayed but by the same man after eleven years! She felt like the greatest fool that ever lived. (89)

This expresses the bitter feelings experienced by Safia as she has been betrayed by a man she has spent almost all her life admiring. In addition, she struggles to take a lasting solution as she concludes her thoughts: "...no, she is through with this young handsome politician. Her idea of a husband was a man that had more substantial qualities; reliability, integrity and moral responsibility. This one has none and no one could convince her to go on with the marriage". (93 - 94). It is therefore not surprising that at the end of the day Safia has decided to let go of Sam. Though Sam might be innocent, he fails to act firmly when handling pressing issues and this weakness compounds issues. Therefore, Safia has taken the right decision by leaving him. It is then, that she realizes her mistake of leaving Sufyan in the first place. Safia's "... only regret was that she had let go a bird in hand to catch two in the bush" (94). Her happiness especially as she tries to re-unite with Sufyan shows the path she has chosen for a successful life ahead. She was so excited "when...Sufyan called her Afy and had waved her to attract her attention. Some excitement like a teenage girl in love, enveloped her" (134).

Safia's anxiety shows something she misses or could not get during her teenage period from Sam. The reconciliation of Safia and Sufyan shows that she has finally accepted what destiny has brought to her. She has moved away from her childhood perception and thinking to the adulthood stage. Safia's maturity and transformation sums the life experiences of an ordinary individual; from a rural setting, to acquiring the western education and her ability to realize her dreams as a medical doctor and a happy house wife. In effect, this character development is in accord with Ogaga's final schema on the character reaching a point of maturity and independence by taking control of her transition.

Again, Abdu suggests Safia as "the novel's protagonist, which chronologically begins with her upbringing from a child of six years, through her years of schooling, first betrothal, university days, graduation, one year of the NYSC and work in the hospital... 'wrapped up'..." (4), thus making the text a typical bildungsroman type.

We turn to Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba*. The titular character is described as a 13-year-old girl, with "robust physical structure that gave her an appearance of someone older" (13). Her shouldering of responsibility at that age signals an individual's realisation and moments of coming to terms with the society: "She was to see to it that the date was written out on the top right hand side of the large blackboard every-morning. The classroom must be swept daily, she was to be the last to leave the class after close of school" (5). While responsibility taking and duty shows the leadership quality in Safia as seen above, it is not the case with Habiba. It

becomes a source of problem for her because she was finding it extremely difficult to convince her mum of the reason for returning late from school. Again, it could be discerned that this is also in agreement with Ogaga's awakening stage. Habiba soon came to the realisation that her responsibilities in school have become an obstacle for her happiness at home.

While Safia in *Invisible Borders* has received some love from her parents and Sam, Habiba has received the opposite. As a means of escape from her mother's trauma, Habiba embarks on a journey in search of her father as well as peace of mind, thus, signaling a period of change and advancement in Habiba's thinking. Her mother's attitude towards her has led her to learn in the hard way by gaining freedom through self-awareness and self-reliance. Though Habiba's decision to leave her mother tends to be a hard one, she feels and has a hope for betterment of life when she finds her father. This is expressed in her conversation with Ummi as follows: "we are going all the same because the time has come for a change in our lives... Habiba's adolescent maturity took the day and they walked on in silence afterwards. They were hungry and thirsty...the sun has become hot but Habiba is determined to reach her father's house without failure" (17). It becomes apparent at this point that the young growing mind of Habiba is determined to attain freedom. She prefers to experience all sorts of hardship and to get what she wants, rather than stay with her unkind mother. Though in her mind she fears that their father may not accept them, her instincts keep driving her towards leaving her mom for good.

In her personal reasoning, Habiba sees herself in "captivity and bondage to the entire world to see just as they were coming with tiny invisible bells...to herald their woes of existence to the world" (19). This unhappiness that Habiba experiences does not just stop with her, as she describes an old woman in Mallam Saleh's shop "in worn-out clothes that had evidently received more than a fair share of soda in its lifetime...buying a little wrap of granulated sugar...she made concerted effort to avoid taking strides for fear of ruining her wrapper" (19). This shows how frustrated other people surrounding Habiba's environment are. The woman's struggle with her worn-out clothes and little sugar shows the extent to which poverty has eaten up the society. The darkness that unfolds to prevent this woman from shaming signals a complete lack of hope in the woman's life in particular and the society at large. Unless she seizes to exist, the old woman's problems seem endless. This is a reality engulfing Habiba's environment. It becomes clear to the reader that Habiba's future may not be different from that of the old woman's or Mohammed, she has succeeded in presenting the old version of Habiba.

The fear that engulfs Habiba as she meets her father shows her coming of age as it shows the difference between herself and her sister, Ummi. It also shows that Habiba has started making sense and becoming conscious of her environment. She fears the embarrassment that will follow should their dad not welcome them and it was only their father's reception that allayed that fear.

While Habiba's struggle to leave her mother for her father is successfully achieved, she is confronted with yet another difficulty that almost vanquished her.

This time, the problem is her grandmother who made her father's house a battle field for a fresh struggle. Her first sight of the woman was an abundant testimony of her biological mother's prophecy. Habiba later started "having the feeling that the old woman was beginning to feign some interest in her and for whatever reason the girl could not say. Somehow, she suspected it was all in bad fate" (25).

The "first impression feelings" Habiba has developed towards her grandmother creates a distance between them. Habiba has strange feelings towards her, but Ummi does not seem to. This shows the difference between Habiba and Ummi.

As Habiba tries to draw the reader's attention to the fact that poverty has been part of the society's problem, the effect of this disease called poverty does not leave her behind. This is because her father's abject poverty has denied her education and opened the door to an early marriage to a millennia's mansion. This early marriage to a man older than her father alone signals the transformation and movement from childhood to maturity, to womanhood for Habiba.

Leaving school is a great loss to Habiba's life as education tends to be the yardstick to a successful living and she lacks it. The old man she is married to has several of her kind, therefore he never knows more than lust for her. The path she has chosen of becoming a lesbian is immediate consequence of that loss. Again, this is a confirmation of Jarome Buckley's description of the traditional structure of bildungsroman, that "The growth of the protagonist occurs according to pattern; The sensitive, intelligent protagonist leaves home, undergoes stage of conflict and growth, is tested by crisis...then then finally the best place to use his/her unique talents" (144). It is all these that make the novel typical of the contemporary generation as homosexuality alongside drinking and smoking are among the major problems engulfing the society at large. They have become sources of joy and happiness to many. Habiba's growth has been tested with a lot of family crisis like broken home, poverty, lovelessness and lack of trust, among other things. These issues greatly affect her upbringing, growth and development. In addition, the issues have been presented as lingering ones as the old woman seem to represent the past, Habiba the present and Ummi, the future. Out of all these, the 'greatest' victim becomes Ummi, Habiba's sister. Unless care is taken, she might also be initiated by her sister and from all indication, it is only a matter of time, she joins the 21<sup>st</sup> Century generation circle.

Taken together, we can infer that Mohammed has tried to show us how the rural northern Nigerian environment operates in the present day. She has succeeded in drawing the reader's attention on the growth, movement, initiation and transformation of the child not only from rural to urban setting, but also from the ignorance of childhood to freedom of adulthood.

The study has attempted an examination of the chosen texts as bildungsroman novels with northern Nigerian setting. However, the two writers differ in their presentation of narratives. While Alkali on the one hand presents, in a flashback, the journey of her protagonist at an early age in a rural setting, there is a

shift to the city life where Safia (the protagonist) acquires some western education and triumphs to become a medical Doctor. She is also able to overcome the feelings she has for Sam as so many doubts shrouded their relationship. Mohammed on the other hand presents, in a chronological order, the journey from an environment that seems to reflect a city where Habiba begins her growth by acquiring some western education. However, her father's abject poverty leads to the end of her education and engages her in an impromptu marriage typical of a village setting. Unlike Safia, Habiba is unable to overcome her problems and she ends up a lesbian and a junkie both of which are negative examples for her helpless younger sister, Ummi.

### Conclusion

On the whole, the paper has succeeded in identifying the chosen novels as typical of the bildungsroman form by focusing on the female protagonists' development of minds and characters. Issues such as marriage, love and poverty have been identified as part of the obstacles in the growth of the African child especially in the contemporary society. The two writers seem to be urging the society to educate the female child in the right way so that she will be able to assimilate and transform herself properly as she grows from childhood to adulthood. It is only through good education and proper attitudes that the northern region would become well equipped to produce responsible children that will serve not just as role models to Nigeria but to the outer world. This is because when one educates a woman, one is educating a society at large.

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