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The Woman in Contemporary Nigerian Society and Bildungsroman as a Revolutionary Tool: A Study of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

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Abstract
Nigerian novelists have always expressed their views on various issues that affect the nation, from the colonial through the postcolonial era to the contemporary times, in varied novelistic styles. Bildungsroman appears to be the favourite baby of most third generation African women novelists. It has become a tool for (re)-creating the image and dream of a woman and a society. It is the same with Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, the author of *Trafficked.* The novel (re)-assesses the place of Nigerian (African) woman in the contemporary modern Nigerian society. Deploying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, it is discovered that the novelist finds the novelistic tradition of Bildungsroman useful as a tool to explore and demand paradigm shift in the popular perception and treatment of women both in individual and larger social circles. The novelist's vision is to ignite social, cultural, and economic revolution that is aimed at repositioning Nigerian women to be at par with their male counterparts. The developmental trajectory of Nneoma, the protagonist, justifies the novel as a Bildungsroman.
Keywords: Contemporary, Bildungsroman, Novelist's Vision, Revolution, Psychoanalysis

Introduction

The simplest understanding of Bildungsroman is that it is inherited from etymology of the terms – *bildung* and roman. *Bildung* meaning education or development while *roman* means novel. Resulting from the etymology, Bildungsroman is often seen as a

novel of education; a novel of developmental trajectory of its protagonist. Critical studies of the novel tradition observe a number of constituent elements. In "A Modernist Insight into Character Formation: The Bildungsroman and Its Thematic Perspectives in *Jacob's Room*" Golban Petru and Derya Benli refer to the elements as the "syntagmatic structure" (3) of the genre. Buckley asserts that a Bildungsroman is a novel that portrays all but two or three of a set list of characteristics which include "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (Tobias Boes 231-2). Idette Noome (129) itemises the characteristics thus:

- a single character's passage from childhood to maturity (adulthood);
- varied experiences from which the protagonist learns;
- a moral/ethical/spiritual crisis of a personal nature;
- some clash and/or engagement with the expectations of society; and
- a maturity which includes some conscious recognition of the protagonist's identity and self-actualising role in the world.

However, Boes notes that the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models. In his words, "scholars of modernism began to see their period as an era of transition from traditional metropolitan novels of formation and social affirmation to increasingly global and fragmentary narratives of transformation and rebellion" (231).

The structural concern of Bildungsroman is change in the individual – "which can only be realised through a balancing of both biological development (physical development) and secondly, as psychological growth" (Ogaga Okuyade 123) – and not necessarily the protagonist's success. Hence the primary goal of Bildungsroman is to present the image of man (whether male or

female) in the process of becoming, and to situate its protagonist on the threshold between different historical eras (Ogaga Okuyade 144).

From its rise in Africa, novelists embraced the Bildungsroman tradition because they find it a suitable instrument to comment and stir action against colonialism/imperialism on their soil, and their enforcers. It has also been found to be useful in attacking and raising consciousness against bad leadership, oppression, suppression, exploitation, and other pertinent issues bordering on politics, culture, economy, ecology, and religion. However, the novelists did modify the tool to suit their own artistic purpose; it has always been taken into the surgical theatre that will find it whole and healthy and actively functioning for the society. Thus, African Bildungsroman "does not emphasise self-realisation and the harmonious reconciliation between the protagonist and his society, as the prototypical Western Bildungsroman does" (Okuyade 124). It rather expresses a variety of factors that obstruct the protagonist's self-realisation. Being emphatic about Nigerian Bildungsroman, Martha Egbedi remarks:

> This is why the Bildungsroman in this context is not just a physical journey of integration or accommodation into the society, but, the dominant feature is change. The change is not just physical, but also psychological. The novels lack harmonious reconciliation of the protagonist with the society, but emphasise that economic and socio–political factors prevent the protagonist from achieving self – realisation. Hence, the protagonist needs a second journey. (61)

It is agreeable that economic and socio-political factors prevent the protagonist from achieving self-realisation, but that does not translate to need for "a second journey". Those obstructions when

metaphorically interpreted stand for something else – an interloper, a suffocating agent that needs to be addressed or dismantled.

How does one justify or evaluate Nneoma's plight in connection with her innocent, happy, and hardworking personality before her trafficking? Where do we blame the innocent young girl's ambition to make life better, not just for herself but her family? Is she to be blamed for not accepting the objectified position Ofomata and her own parents placed on her? Are we going to condemn Nneoma for seeking self-identity as a human, and not a commodity – an asset to raise funds for social recognition? Any attempt to address these questions brings us closer to the novelist's ideological mission, her artistic vision of our own *Bildung* (education and awareness) leading to change – revolution.

Trafficked as a Bildungsroman

Trafficked is a feminist classic of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo whereby the novelist officiates a marriage between migration and cultural matters. It is essentially the story of Nneoma, the favourite daughter of Ogukwe Eke, with the story of Ofomata as a subplot. While the main plot of Nneoma focuses on her trafficking and later survival quest, the subplot largely deals with Ofomata's frustrations as a university student and the heir to his father's *Ozo nkwu* traditional stool. Shuttling her narrative focus on the two characters enables the novelist have a broader portrayal of the ubiquitous decay in the Nigerian society thereby suing for change as to return the polity to the path of progress.

Inasmuch as the novel is a coming of age narrative of Nneoma, a close study of the novel shows that the novelist leaves cryptic message on the place of the woman in Nigerian socio-cultural settings. The treatment of certain cases such as Ogukwe Eke and Lebechi; Nneoma and Ofomata; Hannah and Prophet Elias; et cetera, all offer insights into the place of women as humans in Nigerian society. In other words, it is not merely a story of growth

and development (physical) of Nneoma; it is one of psychological development and imminent change that follows. The complementary benefit is the psychological alteration that entrenches social change – social revolution – since revolution takes its root in human psyche. In *Trafficked,* women like Hannah, Nneoma, Efe, Alice, and other trafficked girls are seen as objects. They are regarded as mere objects, which usefulness lie in satisfying the yearnings of their male counterparts. Commenting on objectification of women, Luke Okolo and Nnenna Ogbele assert thus:

> When a woman is treated as an object, she has no feelings, opinions or rights of her own. In objectification, a person is owned by another which means the person owned lacks autonomy, self-determination, dignity, and treated primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses. (161)

This is still the lot of Nigerian women in the present 21st century. It is this ideas and practices like these that Adimora-Ezeigbo is determined to revolt against, to alter, and to point to the new and more useful perception of women; and a harmonious and progressive one. The novelist sues for a new paradigm, where neither of the two genders is a threat to each other; a kind of gender equality, where though the man is the leader, there exits mutual respect to all parties. This is womanism, and it is "black-centred, it is accommodationist… it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children" (Charles Nnolim 137). It is this quest for change of social, cultural, and most importantly, economic perception of African women as appendages, burdens and objects, which end is men; and of no other essence and purpose that is Adimora-Ezeigbo's artistic vision – the unity of word or artistic beauty and its meaning or sense (John Attinasi 3). To achieve the desired artistic vision is the necessity of deploying the Bildungsroman structure of growth and

development that occur within a historical time of the protagonist, Nneoma.

As the third child and second daughter of her parents, Nneoma grows up much loved by the father. She is forced to escape to Lagos in search of job, in order to dodge the marriage contract with Ofomata, the heir apparent to the stool of *Ozo nkwu* of Ihite-Agu town, as arranged by their parents. From Lagos, she is trafficked to Italy (Rome), and then to the United Kingdom where she is caught by the immigration officers and is deported to Nigeria alongside other trafficked girls. Back to the Country, she strives to get fully rehabilitated, reintegrated into the society, and empowered to be independent and self-fulfilled.

Bildungsroman tradition of the novel genre is known to have peculiar constituent elements (as already cited above). Without these elements often referred to as its "syntagmatic structure" or characteristics forming integral developmental/formative experiences of the protagonist, such a novel is never regarded as a Bildungsroman. The presence of these elements as discussed below proves *Trafficked* as a Bildungsroman.

a. **Childhood**

The novelist tells us little about Nneoma's childhood. However little, the impression is that Nneoma's childhood was spent in Enugu where her father Ogukwe Eke, worked for several years as a clerk in the Internal Revenue Department of the Ministry of Finance before retirement. The novelist describes her childhood as one spent in relative "innocence and blissful ignorance" (Adimora-Ezeigbo 5). She grows up being the idol of her father who is fond of her who prides her as the benevolent incarnate of his mother. Even at six, "She had been a lovely child" (8), whose appearance and character appeals to everyone that meets her. She is the third among the four children of her parents.

b. **Education**

Nneoma receives formal education training as a teacher (66 & 70). So she holds National Certificate of Education (NCE). During her stay at Oasis, she joins a vocational training centre where she becomes a professional tailor. Nneoma returns to the university, where she reunites with Dr. Chindo Okehi and Ofomata after several years. Her strong belief in relief that education can offer is unmatched even as she asserts, "I'll never be happy until I get a degree. That's the only thing that will complete my healing" (164).

c. **Friendship**

Nneoma has a friend, Efe, a fellow trafficked girl from Benin. She is also a trained teacher. Both are deported the same time and rehabilitated at Oasis Youth Centre. From the moment they realise that both share a similar background and trafficking experience, they become co-confidants. She makes Nneoma realise that she is not alone in her world of poverty-stricken background and trafficking. "Efe, your story is so like mine…I feel as if a load has been lifted off my own shoulders" (100). Efe delivers Nneoma's parcel to her parents in Ihite-Agu after her return back to the country.

d. **Travel/Journey**

Travel is one of the basic elements/structures of Bildungsroman, where the protagonist migrates from mainly a rural setting (town) to an urban one (city). Golban and Benli state that the *Bildungsheld* "is in conflict with his or her actual parents, especially father or step-father, or any parental figure…the child leaves home to enter a larger society" (3). Nneoma leaves her parents' home in Ihite-Agu for Lagos city because of their pressure on her to marry Ofomata. This is because of their belief that their marriage will bring succor to the family plight. "For personal reasons, I fled home one Friday morning without telling my family" (126), she tells her friend, Efe. From Lagos, she travels to

Rome, Italy, from where she is marooned to United Kingdom and eventually arrested and deported.

e. **Love**

Love affair is integral part of the structural pattern of a Bildungsroman. Okuyade quotes Jerome buckle t have argued that the protagonist has to experience at least two love affairs; where one will be debasing and the other exalting, "and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraises his values" (143). Unfortunately, the case of Nneoma veers off this prescription as both her experience with Ofomata and Kevin are debasing to herself; first as a girl from a poor home, and second as a trafficked girl trying to reintegrate herself into the society. Golban and Benli opine that the protagonist "has to resist the trial by love and embark on a sentimental career" (2). Nneoma first resists Ofomata to develop herself for self-independence. She further resists the psychological trauma of being denigrated and sacked for being a victim of human trafficking and pursues her career in the university.

f. Moral/Ethical/Spiritual Crisis

Noome prescribes that the protagonist must experience "a moral/ethical/spiritual crisis of a personal nature" (129). Nneoma's first moral/ethical crisis revolves around proposed marriage entered into by herself and Ofomata, the heir apparent of the traditional *ozo nkwu* throne of Ihite-Agu village. She finds herself in a fix: her parents want her to be their ladder up the social profile as they stand to acquire some landed property and other accruing influences from Chief Mbonu Ezenwa, father of Ofomata. Even though Nneoma admires Ofomata as a human being, she detests the restrictions the throne is going to impose upon Ofomata. She makes it clear that, "I don't want you to become *ozo nkwu.*" For Ofomata to denigrate her and her people because of their social standing – "Sometimes I really think you're too arrogant for someone of your background" (78) – means crossing a red line, "a

wicked thing to say" to a woman that is going to be one's own wife. This is the incident that prompts Nneoma to abjure the marriage and seek out self-development and economic emancipation for herself and her family.

Another period of moral/ethical trial is Nneoma's trafficking time in Italy and the United Kingdom. It creates severe psychic disturbances for her – she rejects the idea of giving her body to a man who is not her husband in exchange for money or whatever convenience there attached. Her reaction when Chief Amadi mentions that to her reveals her subconscious notion of the act – "Nneoma's whole body jerked reflexively. She stared back, speechless…she sat like a rock, immobile" (272).

g. Mentorship

Nneoma does not have an elaborate mentoring. Her mentoring comes from two sets of women: Dr. Chindo Okehi, the university lecturer who first rescues her while in United Kingdom for a research fellowship. Her encounter with the woman leaves indelible imprints on her mind that even years after, she remains her model and makes frantic effort to locate her in her office for further mentoring perhaps. Another is at Oasis Youth Centre. The four women – Mrs. Ije Ejekam, Mrs. Ebiere Hart, Mrs. Vicky Lar, and Mrs. Nike Oderinde – mentor her further by their speeches, appearance and conduct. Nneoma, decides to pursue her degree in spite of the challenges, to achieve the self-confidence and recognition these educated women have achieved for themselves.

h. Maturity and Epiphany

Epiphany refers to the manifestation of what the protagonist has become (formed) after a period of education/formation. It is a follow up of maturity, which is the climax of Bildungsroman. It is the peak, the resultant effect of the various experiences of the *Bildungsheld* – the Bindungsroman protagonist, who undergoes changes. In reference to this, Buckle opines that the protagonist

"may visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice" (Okuyade 144). Golban and Benli hold the opinion that this stage comes after adolescence, and "lead to (or should determine) his/her final initiation and formation" (2). Nneoma exhibit two epiphanies. The first is her visit to her parents after she has started working as a professional tailor in Lagos and preparing to commence her university education at Lagos University of Science and Technology. That visit to Ihite-Agu serves to console and raise the fallen spirit of her family about her being alive and working hard for herself and her family.

Nneoma's second epiphany is in the university, where she visits Dr. Chindo Okehi to show her the new path she has chosen, the choice she has made, and the initiation/formation she is embarking on. This demonstrates that Nneoma rejects the social standard, the subsisting social order that denigrates a girl (womanhood). Her recognition by the duo of Dr. Okehi and Ofomata attests to the old traditional system (patriarchy) and the modernist order that assures of a woman's freedom.

The Freudian Perspective

Wilbur Scott found Freud's psychoanalysis to be a scientific analysis of the earlier naturalist theory that man is a helpless victim of "bondage to his libidinous compulsions, or to the repressions society forced upon him" (69). The society in which the individual (a literary character) lives imposes its civility on him or her. This civility Freud calls "reality principle" runs contrary to the natural instincts of the character that Freud refers to as "pleasure principle" (Hall 461). The result is that the instinctual pleasures/desires deprived are repressed to the unconscious and the individual becomes psychologically ill. The challenge at hand is reconciling the character (neurotic patient) with the reality of his environment (society). The acclaimed therapeutic function of psychoanalysis lies in identifying the deprived desires of the

neurotic person and finding a way of amelioration as to find an agreeable common ground. This is because, as Lionel Trilling argues;

> …the reality to which he wishes to reconcile the neurotic patient is, after all, a "taken" and not a "given" reality. It is the reality of social life and of value, conceived and maintained by the human mind and will (Hall 456).

Nneoma is portrayed as a victim of her environment (society). Her story is a mission to prove that "there was something wrong with a culture that burdened its women" cruelly (293). The conflict of the novel, and of course, the psychic one is the opposition of social expectation and reality to Nneoma's natural instinctual desires or habit. From her childhood, she is shown to be free-minded and happily growing up in ignorance of her oedipal instinctual drive; avidly speaking to everyone in sight. This relished pleasure is cut short with the dawning reality that her father Ogukwe Eke has lost his economic strength to provide for the family, and the burden of poverty is weighing Adaeze their mother, and indeed every member of the family, down.

With the dawned reality, Nneoma finds the pleasure of a happy filial life (whereby her oedipal instinct is already threatened) being cut short. Freud's view is that, "we are sometimes willing to forgo gratification to a heroic extent, but usually in the canny trust that by deferring an immediate pleasure we will recoup it in the end, perhaps in richer form (Terry Eagleton 132). But this hope is dashed for Nneoma, who does not find hope for instinctual drive of freedom of expression in the proposed marriage with Ofomata, because she is a woman from a poor home. It is a double blow: first from her parents and siblings, who see her as a medium, a commodity with which to satisfy social needs; secondly from the man she hopes to recoup her lost pleasure as no equal, something not his equivalent. To nail it, Nneoma finds herself in a psychical

withdrawal and repression hence "for personal reasons, I fled home one Friday morning without telling my family" (126).

In line with Freudian theory that the repressed often manifest themselves, beating the ego, especially during sleeps, allowing the id have its way. Dream has been described as the commonest means of revealing the repressed; it is through that we witness first-hand the quarrel between Nneoma and Ofomata (73-79) – the quarrel that prompts her to go out in search of self-emancipation, self-dignity, economic emancipation, and total liberation of herself from social shackles, and her family, too.

The phobia residing in Nneoma's unconscious is responsible for her nausea of male relationship, unlike fellow trafficked girls like Alice and Efe her friend, who are eager to tie the knots. She is instead eager to acquire vocational training and formal and intellectual education that would enable her break economic bounds; achieve intellectual stature and social recognition. With that, her womanhood would be respected and not denigrated; she would attain some self-freedom (especially of speaking her opinion) and would not be maligned. In fact, she is going to attain some level of equality with men and be able to negotiate her marriage and relationship. It would not be negotiated for her. This she finally achieves after admission for a degree in Business Education. The conversation between Ofomata and Dr Okehi reveals exactly that – "I tell you, that girl is determined to get a degree; I wonder if she would be interested in love or marriage now. Anyway, I'm no match-maker, so you'll have to woo and win her by yourself" (311). Ofomata then, accepts to woo Nneoma.

The Novel as Revolutionary

Revolution inherent in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is a non-violent one. It is the form conceptualised by Mounier as quoted in Pralhad Chengte (35) and Gajo Petrovic (152). Revolution of this

kind is a search for a new prosperous social order. Petrovic avers that "only the socialist revolution, which is not the replacement of one form of exploitation by another, more progressive form of it, but the abolition of every exploitation in the deepest and fullest sense."

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is a novel in pursuit of social revolution. The intent of the novelist is to elicit attitudinal and psychological response. The Bildungsroman structure has imbedded in it the potency stirring personal and collective actions against explicit grave social ills. This is the "poetic vision" of the novel; this, the novel is released to the public to accomplish.

Of the revolutionary intent of the Bildungsroman writers, Jarad Fennel (1) states that "In the hands of postcolonial and minority writers, this fictive act becomes political and creative resistance." In *Trafficked* Adimora-Ezeigbo uses this narrative of a growing up girl, Nneoma, to demand cleansing and cure of the society of certain "diseases" threatening its harmony, progress, and even the existence spanning from governance and social welfare, religious intolerance, gender perception, civil service, cultural and interpersonal relations.

Trafficked is a clear indictment of Nigerian governments at all levels as colossal failure. Even though the work begins as a migrant novel, the novelist merely hovered on the issue. She deployed those episodes for reinforcement of her intent of portraying the nadir governance has descended on the Nigerian setting; the polarity of the civil space; to elicit the needed social consciousness and the attendant action towards changing the anomalies. In other words, the novel is intended to drive social change in various respects.

The novelist, Nnolim argues, has social responsibilities. That is the role of the novelist as a teacher, which in the words of Chinua

Achebe, is "to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And is essentially a question of education in best sense of that word" (3). In "The Writer as Patriot", Nnolim submits that "all art is propaganda" (244). It thus imply that every artist has intent, which he officiates the marriage with aesthetics. It is in respect to this that Muhammad Askari discusses literature as a tool for revolution. The critics all argument that a novelist always has intent for writing, but should never allow his "propaganda" overshadow "the literariness" of his writing.

The novelist's utmost interest in the *Trafficked*, as earlier mentioned, is to stir up consciousness and discussion on African culture (especially Nigerian cultures) and the loss of national leadership and ethics that breed devouring monsters of unemployment; embezzlement of public funds and the attendant non-payment of salaries and pensions to public workers; religious extremism; extortion of innocent and vulnerable citizens; erosion of moral values - whereby the woman (the female gender) is the victim. Obviously, it is the prevailing unemployment that Nneoma suffers after her teacher training in Nigeria, and the fact that her father who retired as a civil servant has not been paid any of his retirement benefits that forces her into migration. Ignorantly, she gladly welcomes migration to Italy believing in the deceit of securing a decent job while studying in Italy. She died the moment she realised she and fellow trafficked Nigerian girls are doomed to sexual slavery – to hunt men down and to accept any as may be provided for them to raise the funds spent to process their migration to Europe. From Italy to United Kingdom, from Madam Dollar to Baron, her new pimp who bought her from her initial "owner", Nneoma goes through great physical and most devastating mental ordeals until her deportation.

Unambiguously, governance/leadership failure and cultural objectification of women are dual forces, which combined effects

kicked Nneoma beyond the shores of the country. She and other trafficked girls are absolved of blames. Mrs Nike Oderinde of Oasis Youth Centre tells them, "We do not bother with what led to you being trafficked. What we care about is what you do with your life from now on" (51) because they are victims of the parasitic socio-economic realities of the day. This is made more precise by the Commissioner for Women Affairs thus:

> We are addressing the social and cultural issues that force our girls to consider prostitution as a means of livelihood. It is commendable that bills have been passed against the trafficking of children and women, as well as female genital mutilation. We have increased our efforts to ensure that women have equal rights with men in the field of education. (55)

Interestingly, throughout the complex interconnected themes, Adimora-Ezeigbo pursues her feminist equality of the genders to the resolution of key conflicts in the novel. Looking at the disagreement between Nneoma and Ofomata, both are brought back to each other again on equal pedestal to negotiate their relationship (marriage) without that initial feeling of superiority or some sort of personal worth. This reason being that Nneoma has gained some self-respect by eschewing the marriage in which she was to be a mere mercantile object/asset and so should remain subservient. Similarly, Nneoma does not prostrate begging Chief Amadi to retain her in his company for two reasons: she knows her worth in the tailoring profession; she is almost ready to pursue a more prideful education career that would assure her of self-independence and a higher regard. The circumstances and resolution of the family feud between Ogukwe Eke and Lebechi's family to the satisfaction of both sides is a clear indication that the novelist stands for negotiation (a core ideal of her Snail Sense feminism) as ultimate solution to not only gender issues, but also other social problems; not intimidation.

Through her art, the novelist surreptitiously makes a demand on the society. On the national sphere, men (who represent patriarchy) show disinterest, irresponsibility and disdain to the plight of the suffering masses leading to explosions and fire burns occasioned by scarcity of petroleum, especially kerosene. In the university, male lecturers like Dr Rafiu Komolafe and Dr Edmund Pepple are found guilty of financial and sexual exploitation of vulnerable students. Even Ohaka who lives in Aba does not show concerns to the deplorable condition of things in his family left behind in Ihite-Agu. The portrayal of the female characters like Dr Chindo Okehi, Adaeze, Hannah, Mma, and Nneoma herself are indications of greater sense of responsibility, ethical concern and compassion on the vulnerable and poor and for the social sanity.

A prismatic view of characters based on gender and roles shows the novelist's implied view that women have more impeccable traits; they are reliable, responsible, ethical, and compassionate than men. She advocates change of the primordial belief that men are better and more reliable managers, trainers, and mentors. She instead proves that an educated woman is a national asset that mentors, educates, and provides succuor to the oppressed and depressed. It is the view of the researcher that a woman should be afforded every opportunity to education and self-development; and such a woman should be entrusted with serious leadership responsibilities for a progressive and harmonious society.

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