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[De]Formation and Perpetuation of *Bildungsroman* as a Genre

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Abstract

The present paper argues that Bildungsroman as a genre has been systematically protected and kept in use by the western critics. The paper critically examines the studies of Bildungsroman undertaken by different Western scholars. The discourse of such studies reinforces and helps the genre exercise its power in aesthetic fields. Critics such as Jed Esty, Apollo Amoko, Ralph Austen and Sarah Harrison have attempted to search for the likeness of Bildungsroman in African literature; however, their analysis seem to be farfetched as the novels they analyze have only a cursory resemblance with the model of European Bildungsroman. These critics believe in the universality of the genre Bildungsroman which they try to find out in non-Western literatures. By applying the genre Bildungsroman and its rhetoric of normal development to African novels, they seem to prove Europe as a space for the highest level of human development and the so called third world as the space of human debasement of social, political, economic and aesthetic life. They attempt to perpetuate the myth of First world/Third world hierarchy which is created by West.

Key words: Genre, *Bildungsroman*, aesthetic ideology, Colonialism and Post-colonialism

The history of literary criticism could be seen as the creation and expansion of different generic categories. The generic categorization puts the students of literature at ease. It is due to such classifications one can understand literature in a defining way. There have been a number of studies which argue that the study of genres has been fruitful and important for the literary studies. John Frow, in his book *Genre* (2005), states that Genre is 'a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organizing things into recognizable classes' (51). It 'is a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning' (10). Further he explains that by the word 'constraints' he does not mean a restriction, rather it means the 'structuring effects' that produce the meaning. He considers the views of Adena Rosemarin from her *The Power of Genre* (1985) who believes genre as not a class but a classifying statement (102). He also cites Rick Altman who is the author of *The American Film Musical* (1987) and who argues that "we may fruitfully recognize the extent to which genres appear to be initiated, stabilized and protected by a series of institutions essential to the very existence of genres" (qtd. in Frow 102).Though the genre channelizes reading and puts limitations on the interpretations of the text, it is not a natural part of the text; rather it is something that is guessed (101) and as E.D. Hirsch says "the intrinsic genre is always construed, that is, guessed and is never in any important sense given" (qtd. in Frow 101). Hence Frow argues that 'Genre is neither a property of (and located 'in') texts, nor a projection of (and located 'in') readers; it exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers, and it 'has a *systematic existence* (Emphasis mine) (101). Frow also notes that genres create knowledge and exercise power. It shapes our understanding of the world. It is essential to know how literary genre shapes and controls our understanding. Any literary genre is based on taxonomy and it assumes prototypes as its model to classify the text (Frow 51). Hence it is through the genre that the critics have been influentially creating the hierarchical traditions. The genre bestows the unnecessary authority and importance to the prototype of the genre as in the case of Goethe's text *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* which is thought to be a prototype of the genre *Bildungsroman* (Buckley 12).

From Frow's argument, it can be discerned that *Bildungsroman* as genre is conventional, and it does not have a natural form located in the text. Moreover, it exerts its power through its literary discourse. Also, *Bildungsroman* has been institutionalized with the deliberate efforts. There have been a number of critics who seem to believe that *Bildungsroman* is a universal genre. With this belief, it is interesting to see how the genre *Bildungsroman* has been protected from vanishing from the literary horizons. The critics, in their task of creating and continuing genres of the literary texts, hunt for the likeness among the texts. However, as Frow believes, 'using likeness for a classification raises the problem of where the line of

*dis*similarity is to be drawn' (54). These critics neglect the dissimilar element in their hunt for true *Bildungsroman*. It is from this perspective that, in the present paper, it is argued that *Bildungsroman* as a genre has been systematically protected and extended to apply to non-European novels. The paper examines the studies undertaken by different scholars who have created the discourse around the term *Bildungsroman* that has been exercising power in aesthetic fields. This may also be understood as the perpetuation of the Eurocentric 'aesthetic ideology' (Boes 232).

The German term *Bildungsroman* was used by German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey for the first time in the biography of Frederick Schleiermacher and later it gained popularity through his work *Poetry and Experience* (1906) (231). The meaning of the term *Bildungsroman* is 'the novel of development'. Amoko asserts that "the term *Bildungsroman* refers to a so-called "novel of Formation", that is, a fictional account tracing, usually in the third person, the spiritual, moral, psychological, or social growth of a fictional protagonist, typically from childhood to maturity". The German scholars seem to be so possessive about the term that they chauvinistically declared that 'the novel of formation possesses an inherent national particularity' (Boes 232). With the same thesis, Dilthey also advocated that *Bildungsroman* is a product of the sociological circumstances that were present only in Germany (232). Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is the earliest example of *Bildungsroman* in world literature. According to the German critics, it is in the novels of Goethe, Schiller, and others that the true development of the protagonist can be found. However, the term *Bildungsroman* has long been debated in favour and against its worth. The critics such as Fredrick Jameson and Marc Redfield have out rightly dismissed the term for its aesthetic ideology (230).

Jerome H. Buckley in his *Season of Youth* (1974) provides defining characteristics of *Bildungsroman*: "Childhood, the conflict of generation, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (18). In his preface, he also admits that he feels some kind of *awkwardness* in applying the term *Bildungsroman* to English novels (emphasis mine). This made him accept other synonyms for *Bildungsroman* as the novel of youth, the novel of education, of apprenticeship, of adolescence and even life novel (Buckley vii). Buckley's awkwardness points to the problematic nature of the genre of *Bildungsroman*. Buckley informs that in Germany *Bildungsroman* is further categorized by the critics into: 'The *Entwicklungsroman*, a chronicle of a young man's general growth rather than his specific quest for the self-culture; the *Erziehungsroman*, with an emphasis on the youth's training and formal education; and the *Kunstlerroman*, a tale of the orientation of an artist' (13). Any genre, as a general category

can be accepted, but when critics create subcategories in the same genre, the genre begins to acquire complexities.

Buckley's primary analytical perspective to the novels is biographical, as he considers *Bildungsroman* as autobiographical novel in which fact and fiction are inextricably interwoven. He argues that the strength and weakness of *Bildungsroman* 'lie in its autobiographical content' (26). Buckley, in the same book, examines the English novels written by novelists from Dickens to Golding in order to discover a tradition of *Bildungsroman* in the British literary tradition. What makes it inappropriate is his inclusion of Wordsworth's *Prelude* in this tradition. According to E. D. Hirsch, as Frow understands, that genre is the guess that we make about what kind of thing this is' (qtd. in Frow 101). Buckley in his categorization of the novels written by Dickens, Meredith, George Eliot, Samuel Butler and the other English novelists apparently makes a guess and categorizes them as *Bildungsroman.* However Buckley shows little interest in other modernist writers whose novels do not fit into the definition of genre (Boes 232).

Mikhail Bakhtin holds the view that true *Bildungsroman* presents 'the image of man in the process of becoming' (21). He calls this novel 'the novel of human emergence' with an 'assimilation of real historical time' (21). In such novel, time plays very significant role in determining the hero's destiny. In his view, there is inseparable link between man's individual emergence and historical emergence. (23). Bakhtin poses problematic aspects of *Bildungsroman*. He thinks that there are very few novelists like Goethe, Rabelais and Grimmelshausen, in whose novels, the hero emerges *along with the world* (23) They successfully assimilate the historical time in the novel and portray the hero as a 'man growing in national and historical time (25). However, Bakhtin thinks this type of novel rarer. It is quite evident that Bakhtin seems to tighten the boundaries of *Bildungsroman*. However, after Bakhtin, the radius of the genre *Bildungsroman* was kept widening in the late 20th century. Refering to the expansion of the genre of *Bildungsroman*, Boes observes:

The rise of feminist, postcolonial and minority studies during 1980s and 90s led to an expansion of the traditional *Bildungsroman* definition; the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to Nineteenth century European models (231).

Feminists too find that the term *Bildungsroman* has its 'phallocentric premises' that excludes 'female experience from the genre' (234).

Jed Esty made a detailed study of, what he calls, the 'colonial *Bildungsroman'* to explore the novel's form, imperialism and national historical time in his essay 'The Colonial *Bildungsroman*: *The Story of an African Farm* and the Ghost of Goethe'. In his analysis of the novel, he argues that 'Colonialism disrupts *Bildungsroman* and its humanist ideals,

producing jagged effects on both the politics and poetics of subject formation (411). Here, the humanist ideals that Esty reckons are European and hence, Eurocentric. However, he does not think about the socio-cultural differences in his argument. Moreover, if *Bildungsroman* is disrupted by colonialism, can it be called *Bildungsroman* at all? Esty's argument presupposes that the natural *Bildungsroman* did exist in pre-colonial era and later at the arrival of the colonialism, it was disrupted. Esty's pronouncements are the outcomes of his incorrect application of generic principles to those novels which are not *Bildungsroman* in the first place. He considers that *Bildungsroman* is a universal form of the novel and goes on searching for the *Bildungsroman*. He also gives the examples of the novels written by European novelists as Kafka, Proust, Mann, and Wilde who were contemporary to Olive Schriener and in his view; they loosened the structure of the Victorian Bildungsroman (411). Esty seems to believe that these novelists were deliberately trying to loosen the *Bildungsroman;* however it was not. He also notes that:

'Here as we *look in vain for a true Bildungsroman* we tumble quickly from Forster to Hardy, to Eliot to Dickens to Bronte to Austen to Scott and finally even to Goethe whose Wilheim Mister, many Germanist now agree, appears to violate most of the generic rules invoked in its honor (426) (Emphasis mine).

Esty agrees that the task of identifying true *Bildungsroman* is a vain activity and contradicts himself while he finds colonial Bildungsroman. However, he seems to treat *Bildungsroman* as an intrinsic genre, something that is a natural part of the novel. He considers that the novelists that he discusses were writing a *Bildungsroman* intentionally. He examines some modernist works of Western writers like Conrad, Woolf and Joyce whose protagonists come in contact with the empire. He views that Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* portray the 'youthful protagonists who conspicuously do not grow' (411). If the protagonist does not attain maturity, how come they are *Bildungsromans*? The precondition of the *Bildungsroman* is *Bildung* of the hero at the end of the novel. Austen also criticizes Esty's work and says 'the links he [Esty] establishes between literature and political (as opposed to socioeconomic) issues are more inferred than explicitly articulated in the novels themselves (223).

Coming to the discussion of *Bildungsroman* in African literature, it is essential to understand the nature of the African society. The African society, like other non-Western societies, has a collectivist orientation. African society promotes the collective self that gives more importance to the welfare of community, interdependence and interconnectedness. These values are cherished, imbibed and promoted in African culture. This collectivist nature of African society gives priority to community over the individual growth. So the kind of self culture that is expected in European *Bildungsroman* is not quite evident in African coming-

of-age narratives. Tsitsi Danagrembga, Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani, Helen Oyeyemi, and many other African writers have written coming-of-age narratives. However, their novels do not fit into the definition of European *Bildungsroman.* These novelists show the difficulties of the childhood protagonists whose growth definitely contrasts with the growth of the adolescents in the Western countries. In some of the novels like, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) children tend to create more community oriented self and abandon European religion and culture that promotes the individualism. Abani's novel *Graceland* (2004) also depicts the childhood struggles of Elvis Oke who has to leave the country in search of his true self. Helen Oyeyemi's novel *The Icarus Girl* (2006) also portrays the picture of a half Nigerian and half British girl Jessamy who does not grow due to her hybrid identity. But these novels do not follow the trajectory of European model of *Bildungsroman.* In a way, the search for the African *Bildungsroman* reveals that it does not exist. In their attempt to search for the African *Bildungsroman,* some African critics have loosened the definition of the *Bildungsroman* to that extent of including African autobiographies in the genre *Bildungsroman*. Apparently, they fail to get convincing African *Bildungsroman*.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is the most cited so called African *Bildungsroman.* It describes the struggle of African girls during their coming-of-age in the collectivist culture: Tambu and Nyasha. Tambu is raised in a poor family in Zimbabwe (Collectivist society) and Nyasha is brought up in the Western culture (Individualistic society) and later brought to Zimbabwe. Dangarembga contrasts the development of Tambu with Nyasha. Tambu, who is firmly rooted in Shona culture of Zimbabwe, leads a normal path of development due to her collective identity, whereas Nyasha is uprooted and brought up in Western culture. Therefore, it becomes difficult for Nyasha to cope with the norms of Shona culture that her father strictly expects her to follow. Dangarembga seems to suggest that be it a person or the genre *Bildungsroman,* whatever is Western cannot grow naturally in African soil.

Nyasha suffers Anorexia/Bulimia, a psychological disorder regarding eating habits. Shaw explains "Nyasha's anorexia-bulimia is an evidence of her attempt to recover the cherished child, an attempt that is both physically and psychologically impossible, hence Nyasha's madness" (12). Being a misfit, in collectivistic culture, Nyasha shrinks backward in her development to her childhood. This development is exactly opposite of the normal development of the protagonist in the *Bildungsroman*. These novelists paint the grim condition of postcolonial states that causes the irregular and sometimes abnormal development of the humans. Hence the novels do not sufficiently fit into *Bildungsroman*.

Apollo Amoko, one of the critics who believe in the continuation of the *Bildungsroman* in African novel, asserts that autobiography "may be said to represent a kind of *Bildungsroman*" (196) and applies the norms of *Bildungsroman* to autobiography. He cites some of the examples of autobiographies and novels to explain the tradition of *Bildungsroman* in African literature. He considers J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, Camara Lay's *The African Child*, Wole Soyinka's *Ake*, Tsitsi Danagrembga's *Nervous Conditions* as the examples of African *Bildungsroman*. However, his inclusion of autobiographies in *Bildungsroman* and discovery of similarity in the genres make the classification of African *Bildungsroman* problematic. He reveals certain similarities in the emergence of *Bildungsroman* in Europe and Africa. In his view, both European and African *Bildungsroman* emerged during the transitional phase of their respective histories. He calls it the transitional period as 'radical transformation and social upheaval' (200). However, Amoko could not see that Europe's modernization, industrialization, urbanization, secularization, democratization and so on was due to their colonies in the rest of the world. The even development of the protagonists in the European *Bildungsroman* is the result of the spread of European Empire across the globe. The emergence of the so called *Bildungsroman* in the third world literature in general, and in African literature in particular, is an obvious outcome of Empire and its imposition of European languages and literature. It is through the teaching of European languages and literatures the aesthetic ideology of Europe was imprinted on the educating mind. The genre did not evolve in African literature the way it did in Europe; rather it was systematically brought through language and literature teaching. Amoko focuses more on the development of the genre and the similarities; however, he does not talk about dissimilarities of African *Bildungsroman*. He pays more attention to the formation of Tambu and ignores Nyasha's deformation and its causes. In his analysis of the African novels and autobiographies, he seems to be a critic who is interpellated by European aesthetic ideology as he uses the phrase as 'Like its European forebear' (200). It is quite evident that the analysis of these novels unconsciously continues and prospers the European tradition rather than African.

Ralph Austen identifies certain works that could be categorized as *Bildungsroman*, though African *Bildungsroman* deviates from its European model (215). Like Amoko, Austen also views autobiographies as *Bildungsroman*. Austen pays more attention to the Tambu's development and views it as the centre of the narrative. Hence he calls it African *Bildungsroman*. But he does not say much about the anti-development of Nyasha that goes against the norms of *Bildungsroman*.

Another critic who works in line of *Bildungsroman* is Sarah K. Harrison. She observes that Chris Abani, through his protagonist Elvis Oke in his novel *Graceland*, seeks to undermine the generic expectations of European *Bildungsroman*. Harrison argues that through the

'suspended existence' of Elvis in the city of Lagos (Nigeria), Abani describes Elvis' failure to achieve adulthood due to the inhibitions imposed both by the state and the society (99). She critically analyses the novel in the generic tradition of *Bildungsroman* with its European roots and finds 'the stark unevenness of development that persists within the postcolonial state' (99). She views Abani's world in the novel as 'a fractured urban world' that punctures the progress of Elvis Oke and inhibits him from gaining maturity. Harrison claims that Abani appropriates the genre *Bildungsroman* in order to narrate the story of stalled urban development (99). However, it is questionable as to who appropriates the genre. Is it a writer or a critic? If Abani is appropriating the genre, it will be proved that the genre is evidently inappropriate for present novel which is produced in the African conditions. Harrison's argument seems confusing since she uses two words 'undermining' and 'appropriating' the genre at the same time. She gives the impression that she is influenced by Frederick Jameson in her analysis of Abani's text, as it has undercurrents of Frederick Jameson's statement: "all third world texts are necessarily ...to be read as... national allegories". This is evident when she says, "Abani exposes discrepant trajectories of development that exist within a single city, suggesting the untenability of national models which perpetuate a "First world"/"Third world" hierarchy (97). Harrison refers to this hierarchy that she believes in. She reads the text in hand as what Jameson calls, 'national allegory' and reemphasizes the existence of such category as the Third world. Jameson's views on the third word literature were criticized by Aijaj Ahmad who claims that Jameson's statement about the Third World literature as national allegory is contentious. In his view, Third world literature does not exist and Jameson seems to be homogenizing the texts written in the non-Western countries. Ahmad calls this strategy 'cultural homogenisation'. Harrison's search for the *Bildungsroman* in Abani's text is influenced by Jameson's rhetoric that seeks to look at the texts through the lenses of their past colonial and imperial experiences.

The psychological and Anthropological research proves that the adolescence phase is a socio-cultural phenomenon. Puberty is universal; however, adolescence is not universal, for the nature of adolescence varies from culture to culture. European adolescence experiences are different from the African experiences. It is important to note that the African post-colonial condition reflected in the novels is not conducive for the normal and regular development of the fictional characters. The political and social circumstances in postcolonial countries pose a great threat in the 'coming-of-age' process. Moreover, unlike their European counterparts, the protagonists in the colonial and postcolonial narratives are rooted in the collectivist societies whose development is different from European individual development. The self-culture that European *Bildungsroman* promotes is not visible in the colonial and postcolonial countries. The cultures from postcolonial countries give priority to the development of

community above the individual development. Therefore conforming African *Bildungsroman* to the European model is an illusion. Attempting to fit the African novels into the category of *Bildungsroman* is in one way or the other extending the Eurocentric discourse that perpetuates and imposes its, as Redfield says, 'aesthetic ideology' (Boes 230) on the literatures produced in post-colonial worlds. The critics of *Bildungsroman* seem to be either shrinking the scope of the genre or expanding it. They appear to be stuffing the genre with the novels that are conspicuously not *Bildungsroman.*

The present paper does not claim that 'genre' as a general concept and the term *Bildungsroman* in particular, is useless. Rather it claims that the critics should set the boundaries of a particular genre. It makes the African critics aware about the unAfricanness of the *Bildungsroman* genre and its use as a tool to impose its ideology. Limitless stuffing of the literary works in the same genre will not create the healthy literary tradition that Eliot had anticipated. The critics such as Jed Esty, Apollo Amoko, Ralph Austen and Sarah Harrison have made an attempt to find the likeness of *Bildungsroman* in the African literature; however their analysis seem to be farfetched as the novels that they analyze have only a cursory resemblance with the model of European *Bildungsroman*. These critics believe in the universality of the genre *Bildungsroman* which they try to find out in non-Western literatures. It will not be out of context to see what Chinua Achebe says pertinently:

I should like to see the word 'universal' banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world (Achebe 60).

The above lines are quite suggestive for the application of *Bildungsroman* as a universal genre as well. At the end of the same essay, Achebe refers to the fact that our (African) critics are hesitant to take control of the African literary criticism. Hence he appeals all African critics to work hard to create real African criticism of literary texts. In Achebe's view, it is African critics who can give justice to African literature with their African culture specific criticism. These African culture oriented critics will not seek to analyze African literature with the standards of non-African models.

Through these studies, critics seem to prove unevenness of the third world countries. By applying the genre *Bildungsroman* and its rhetoric of normal development to African novels, they seem to set out to prove Europe as a space for the highest level of human development and the so called third world as the space of human debasement of social, political, economic, and aesthetic life of an individual. They attempt to perpetuate the myth of First world/Third world hierarchy which is created by Westerners. Apparently, these critics are literally, to employ Austen's title of the essay in a modified version, struggling with the colonial and postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. What these critics ignore is the fact that the novelists do not

belong to the European literary tradition and even might not have the slightest idea that they are writing in line of or for the subversion of a specific genre. The critics have been making a deliberate attempt to keep, to employ Esty's term, 'the Goethe's ghost' (the term *Bildungsroman*) alive. In doing this, they are perpetuating the term *Bildungsroman* and its well known aesthetic ideology. Why not let the ghost of Goethe be buried forever and look at the newly published novels in colonial and postcolonial countries with fresh perspective.

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