
AFRICAN BILDUNGSROMAN: SHIMMER CHINODYA'S LITERARY VISION IN *HARVEST OF THORNS*

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Abstract

Bildungsroman is a multifaceted process that marks the transition from youth to maturity. Since its emergence in eighteenth century Europe, this literary genre has influenced global literature and has become a topic of controversy within the literary circle. Ranging from themes of French revolution to transnationalism and from colonization to post-independence cynicism, the Bildungsroman has continually served as a literary forum for discussing political, social and ideological conflicts. The purpose of this study is to explore the advancements in the postcolonial variations of the Bildungsroman. Specifically, it investigates how African writers have altered this European genre to align with their social realities. By analysing Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns*, this article illustrates how the protagonist Benjamin is denied of the conventional path to maturity, which is typically found in the European Bildungsroman.

Key words: Postcolonial Bildungsroman, colonialism, liberation war, selfhood, maturation**Introduction**

The Quest For Identity Is An Omnipresent And Inexhaustible Theme In Literature, One Largely Associated With The Bildungsroman Genre. Popularized By The German Philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey In His Work *Poetry And Experience* (1902), The Genre Traces The Formation Of An Individual's Identity And Worldview. This Novelistic Discourse, Which Flourished Among The Eighteenth And Nineteenth-Century English Writers, Is Distinctly Defined By Mikhail Bakhtin As The "The Path Of A Man's Emergence From Youthful Idealism And Fantasies To Mature Sobriety And Practicality"(22). Jerome H. Buckley's In His Seminal Work *Season Of Youth: The Bildungsroman From Dickens To Golding* (1974) Provides A Typical Framework Of A Bildungsroman Plot As Developed In English Novels. To Quote, A Child Of Some Sensibility Grows Up In The Country Or In A Provincial Town, Where He Finds Constraints, Social And Intellectual, Placed Upon The Free Imagination. His Family, Especially His Father, Proves Doggedly Hostile To His

Creative Instincts Or Flights Of Fancy, Antagonistic To His Ambitions, And Quite Impervious To The New Ideas He Has Gained From Unprescribed Reading. His First Schooling, Even If Not Totally Inadequate, May Be Frustrating Insofar As It May Suggest Options Not Available To Him In His Present Setting. He Therefore, Sometimes At A Quiet Early Age, Leaves The Repressive Atmosphere Of Home (And "Education" Begins, Not Only His Preparation For A Career But Also . . . His Direct Experience Of Urban Life. The Latter Involves At Least Two Love Affairs Or Sexual Encounters, One Debasing, One Exalting, And Demands That In This Respect And Others The Hero Reappraise His Values. By The Time He Has Decided, After Painful Soulsearching, The Sort Of Accommodation To The Modern World He Can Honestly Make, He Has Left His Adolescence Behind And Entered Upon His Maturity. His Initiation Complete, He May Then Visit His Old Home To Demonstrate By His Presence The Degree Of His Success Or The Wisdom Of His Choice. (17-18)

Buckley Refers To This European Prototype As A Flexible Archetype, Noting That While No Single Novel Will Contain All Of Its Elements, But None Can Omit More Than Two Or Three Of Its Features. In Recent Decades, The Inherent Limits Of This Eurocentric Model Have Made It As A Focal Point For Literary Innovation. A Wide Range Of Minority, Female And Postcolonial Writers Have Appropriated And Subverted The Traditional Bildungsroman To Explore Specific Challenges Pertaining To Their Nation Or Culture.

Postcolonial Writers In Particular Have Embraced The Bildungsroman Genre Transforming It Into An Effective Tool For Social And Political Critique. Apart From Tracing The Protagonist's Journey Of Selfhood, It Has Become A Potent Structure To Raise Consciousness Against The Complex Legacies Of Colonialism, Imperialism, Migration, Racism, Exploitation And Other Significant Issues Bordering On Gender, Politics, War, Economy And Religion. Postcolonial Bildungsroman Differs Significantly From Its European Counterpart. In Traditional Bildungsroman, The Protagonists Remain Rooted In Their Cultural And Societal Norms Typically Trying To Comprehend The Modernism Of The Emerging Era. Their Journey Is One Of Personal Maturation In A Stable Society. Whereas, In Postcolonial Bildungsroman The Protagonists Do Not Have A Pre-Existing Culture Or A Society To Reconcile. Shaped By The Dynamics Of Imperialism And Cultural Materialism, They Are Distanced From Their Indigenous Heritage And Community. Their Coming-Of-Age Is Not A Simple Process Of Self-Formation But A Troubled Negotiation Of Fragmented Identity. Apart From Determining An Individual's Personal Development And Integration Into Society This Narrative Interrogates The Third World's Struggle To Understand Hybridity, Collective Trauma, Ambiguous Self, National Identity And Expedition To Reclaim Nativity.

The African Articulation Of The Postcolonial Bildungsroman Sheds Light On African Side Of The Story. Writers Such As Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Tsisti Dangarembga, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Shimmer Chinodya And Chris Abani Have Modified The Classical Genre To Challenge The Western Notion Of Progress

And Individualism By Foregrounding Collective Histories, Fragmented Realities And Unresolved Identities. Unlike The European Bildungsroman, Which Often Portrays A Protagonist's Linear Progress Toward Self-Discovery And Social Integration, African Adaptations Depict Protagonists Whose Growth Is Troubled By Systemic Instability. These Narratives Are Marked By Africa's Bleak Political Backdrop, Corruption, Authoritarian Government Rule, Countless Civil Wars, Cultural Dislocation And Ethno-National Conflict. As Ogaga Okuyade Notes, "African Coming-Of-Age Narrative Does Not Emphasise Self-Realisation And The Harmonious Reconciliation Between The Protagonist And His Society, As The Prototypical Western Bildungsroman Does" (124). Instead, Such Narratives Explore The Various Socio-Political And Psychological Forces That Obstruct The Individual's Progress Towards Adulthood. This Research, By Focusing On Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest Of Thorns*, Examines How The Protagonist Benjamin Is Structurally Denied Access To The Conventional Path To Maturity Of The Classical Bildungsroman.

Plot Overview

Shimmer Chinodya Is One Of The Earliest African Writers To Document Challenges Of Postcolonial Zimbabwean Identities And War Trauma. His Novel *Harvest Of Thorns*, Published In 1989 Is An African Bildungsroman Set In Southern Rhodesia (Now Zimbabwe) Between 1950 And 1980 During The Liberation War. The Novel Traces Benjamin Tichafa's Journey From Childhood To Adulthood, Altering Between His Family's Values And The Radical Ideas Of Black Nationalism. The Plot Unfolds Through A Retrospective Narrative, Beginning With The Protagonist Benjamin's Return From Exile In 1980. It Then Shifts Back To His Childhood And His Eventual Involvement In The Zimbabwean Liberation War. Benjamin's Revolutionary Spirit Drives Him To Abandon Education And Join The Military. As A Guerrilla Fighter, He Faces Daily Challenges And Encounters The Harsh Realities Of Liberation War. Upon Returning To Rhodesia After Independence, He Finds Out That Nothing Much Has Changed, Including His Families Livelihood, Compelling Him To Rethink The Vision Of Freedom. The Novel Offers A Solemn And In-Depth Look At The Double-Edged Nature Of Zimbabwe's Bloody Revolution. On One Hand, It Ended The White Minority Rule, While On The Other Hand It Left People Grappling With Psychological Challenges And Identity Crisis As They Attempt To Return To Normalcy.

Childhood

According To Mbanefo S. Ogene And Luke Ndudi Okolo, "One Common Phenomenon Among African Bildungsroman Novelists Is Expression Of Dissatisfaction Mainly By Their Protagonists And One Or More Other Characters Over Some Social, Political, Religious, Or Cultural Experiences Prominent In Their Society"(6). In *Harvest Of Thorns*, Chindoya Embodies This Dissatisfaction Through The Protagonist Benjamin, Whose Conservative Christian Upbringing Strips Him Of His Shona Cultural Heritage And Robs Him Of His Childhood Innocence. Without Recognizing Christianity As A Colonial Instrument Of Control, Benjamin's Parents Embraced The Church's Teachings Wholeheartedly. The Rigid Emphasis On Moral Discipline, Obedience And Conformity Stifles Benjamin's Natural Growth And Progress. He And His Siblings Had To Pray Before Meals, Sleep, And Even Trivial Acts Like Having Snacks. They Were Barred From Enjoying

Usual Childhood Activities Like Socializing With Friends, Dancing, Watching Films, And Listing To Songs, Attending Sports Events Or Applying Makeup.

Instead, Their Lives Revolve Around Religious Activities Like Sunday School, Listening To Gospels, Attending Church Congregation And Fellowship Camp Meetings. Since His Life Is Regulated By Strict Religious Practices, There Is No Room For Personal Growth. He Finds His Home Claustrophobic, As He Is Unable To Escape The Religious Zealotry Even In The Absence Of His Parents. As Focult Says The "... Surveillance Is Permanent In Its Effects, Even If It Is Discontinuous It Is In Action..."(201) In His House. This Rigid Spiritual Discipline Stifles Benjamin's Youth, Robbing Him Of Childhood Bliss, Impulsiveness, And Emotional Freedom. The Persistent Pressure From His Parents To Prioritize The Church First In Every Aspect Of Life Instils In Him A Deep Sense Of Resentment And Estrangement. As He Vividly Confesses, "I Grew Up With God Breathing Down My Neck And It Made Me Hate My Parents" (Chinodya 629). The Religious Colonialism Ultimately Leaves Benjamin Disconnected From His Roots, Growing Up With Little To No Knowledge Of His Shona Origin And Cultural Identity.

Education And Early Rebellion

Mbanefo S. Ogene And Luke Ndudi Okolo Argues That "The Social-Cultural Background Of Each Novel Determines The Growth Process Of The Protagonists. This Implies That The Environment Plays A Vital Role In The Maturation Process Of The Protagonists And Quest For Self-Autonomy" (7). Having Been Set During The Zimbabwean Liberation War, Benjamin's Bildungsroman Journey Is Profoundly Influenced By The Ideals Of Black Nationalist Movement. As A School Boy, Benjamin Aspired To Join The Black Nationalist Movement To Overthrow The Colonial Regime And Build A Nation Based On The Principle Of Racial Equality And Self-Determination. However, Unlike Him There Was No Room For The Development Of Anti-Colonial Consciousness Among His Peers Because The Colonial Educational System Was Designed To Stifle Such Rebellious Thinking. His Resistance Towards The Assimilationist Educative System Was Not Only An Act Of Adolescent Rebellion, But Also An Early Indication Of A Deeper Ideological Conflict.

Benjamin's Search For Selfhood And Autonomy Eventually Led Him To Take Part In School Demonstrations, Marking The Beginning Of His Revolutionary Phase. His Rebellious Nature First Surfaced When He Fought A Schoolmate Who Mocked His Family As Sellouts. However, His Political Resistance Intensified When He, Along With Other Young Revolutionaries, Took Part In Burning Down A Beer Hall. This Crossroad In His Journey Represents More Than Just Teenage Defiance; It Marks The Beginning Of Adulthood Characterized By Political Awakening And Ideological Clarity.

Alarmed By Benjamin's Growing Radicalism, His Parents Sent Him In To Boarding School. This Institution, Another Cultural Tool Of Colonialism Discouraged Revolutionary Thoughts. Instead Of Fostering Political Awareness, It Encouraged Passivity And Religious Obedience. Nonetheless, The School Could Not Quench Benjamin's Desire For Autonomy,

Righteousness And Racial Dignity. He Secretly Participated In Black Nationalist Demonstrations. Before His Active Involvement In The Demonstration, Benjamin Experienced An Intense Mental Interrogation:

“Have You Forgotten The Sergeant’s Warning When You Burnt The Beer Hall?”

No. “Then Why Don’t You Just Concentrate On Your Schoolwork?” *I Don’t Know.* “You Think You’re Clever, Don’t You?” No. “Are You Stubborn Because You’re Bitter?” No. “Do You Know What Country You’re Living In?” *Rhodesia.* “And You Know What Happens To Stubborn Young Black Boys Who Get Expelled From School?” *I Know* “You Don’t Want To Spend Half Your Life In Prison, Do You?” No. “You Don’t Think You’re A Hero, Do You?” No. (Chinodya 252)

Despite This Powerful Psychological Turmoil And Fear, Benjamin Joined The Black March-Holding Banner, Which Read, "The Boys In The Bush Are Our Brothers"(255). When The Police Identified Him, He Made The Hard Decision To Flee Across The Border Leaving His Family Behind In Search Of A Purposeful Life. His Decision To Go Into Exile And Join The Bush War Represents His Full Initiation Into Adulthood, Which Is Defined By Nationalistic Dedication Rather Than Personal Comfort.

Guerrilla Warfare And Romance

Benjamin's Decision To Join The Bush Marks His Transformation From An Inquisitive Adolescent To A Dedicated Revolutionary. Entering The World Of Guerrilla Warfare, He Was Shoved Into A World Of Bodily Discipline, Ideological Forging, And Unfiltered Violence. After Being Renamed ‘Pasi Nema Sellout,’ Benjamin's Personal History Is Erased And He Endures A Symbolic Rebirth That Affirms His New Revolutionary Identity. He Along With Other Militants Had To Endure Rigorous Bodily Training And Relentless Guard Duty. Apart From The Constant Threat Of Enemies, Gunfire And Bombs, The Militants Were Fighting A Never-Ending Battle Against Starvation And Disease. Despite Being Sincerely Commitment And Enduring These Hardships, Benjamin Was Not Deployed To The War. This Made Him Question The Purpose And Direction Of His Involvement In The Liberation War. He Feels That Without Combating In Battlefield, His Transition Is Incomplete. To Quote, Days Passed And Weeks Passed And Your Body Steeled With Running. Wedded To River Water And Maize Meal And Beans, Your Stomach Lusted For The Smells From The Fires. Your Back Jilted Memories Of Mattresses And Your Skin Closed To Insect Bites. You Made Peace With Your Mane Of Hair Or Mowed It Down, Like A Chastened Bride. Still, You Had No Gun. (300)

Golban And Benli Had Proposed That In An Ideal Bildungsroman, "He/She Has To Resist The Trial By Love And Embark On A Sentimental Career"(2). True To This Perspective, Benjamin Develops An Emotional Attachment Towards Ropa, A Fellow Soldier Involved In Teaching The Children At The Camp. Benjamin's Sudden Yearning For Attention And Intimacy Marked His Passage Into A New Phase Of Adolescence. Though This Romantic Stir Thrilled Him, It Was Also Twisted With Fear Of Being Rejected. His Emotional Vulnerability Is Explored In The Following Lines, "Months Of Running And Exercise Had Made Him Almost Forget The Little He Knew About How To Talk To A Girl"

(319). Nevertheless, This Romantic Affair Ended Almost As Quickly As It Began. Ropa Was Shot Dead Right Before Him In An Unexpected Enemy Raid. This Encounter Remains A Permanent Scar In His Coming-Of-Age Journey. Benjamin's Romantic Awakening Is Overshadowed By The Horrific Realities Of War. It Emphasizes That In The Postcolonial Bildungsroman, Emotional Development Is Frequently Entwined With Loss, Suffering And Systemic Violence.

War And Psychological Crisis

The Agony And Trauma Of Witnessing Ropa's Death Caused Benjamin To Become Emotionally Numb And Dedicate Himself To Combat Duties. He And His Comrades Plunged Into A Series Of Clandestine Operations. Benjamin's Continual Exposure To Violence Soon Turned Into A Coping Mechanism In The Survival-Driven Milieu. As Fanon Suggests Violence, "...Frees The Native From His Inferiority Complex And From His Despair And Inaction; It Makes Him Fearless And Restores His Self-Respect" (94). Here Violence Is Portrayed As A Cleansing Process, Which Allows The Militants To Channel Their Mental Trauma And Psychological Turmoil. Everything Became Mechanical In The Bush: Planting Explosives, Destroying Enemy Camps, Killing Suspected Traitors And Vanishing Back Into The Hideouts. However, With Each Combat Mission, The Question Of Why They Joined The Guerrilla Movement Remained Unanswered.

The Bush Symbolized Dehumanization. It Stripped Soldiers Of Their Individuality And Empathy For Humankind. Love, Friendship Or Any Social Relationship Did Not Last In The Bush. To Quote, It Struck Him That Though They, As A Group, Shared The Common Fate Of Having Been Wrenched From Their Youth By The War And United In The Bitterness Of Having Survived Together The Savage Bombings In The Training Camps – Each Comrade Was Really On His Own. The Nature Of The War Itself – The Relentless Routine Of Guarding The Camp, Eating, Sleeping, Conducting Pungwes, Reconnaissance, Ambush And Retreat Seldom Allowed Them To Be Together For Any Stretch Of Time. In The Face Of Constant Danger, The Differences Of Their Backgrounds And Characters Blurred Into Insignificance. Social Conversation Was Rare. Though He Could Claim Certain Intimacies It Was Futile, If Not Foolish, To Expect Friendship. (Chinodya 549)

Benjamin Continued To Battle Without Clarity, Becoming Trapped In A Cycle Of Methodical Violence Without Direction. He Went From Being A Committed Revolutionary To Becoming A Mechanical Weapon Of Violence. This Psychological Toll Applied Not Only To Benjamin, But Also To All The Other Militants Who Were Involved In Guerrilla Warfare.

Maturity And Awakening

As The War Can To An End, Benjamin And The Ndebele Girl Nkazana Whom He Saved During The Battle Resolved To Return Home, Determined To Rebuild A Life Together. However, Homecoming To Benjamin Was Not Met With Celebration As He Hoped For. Rather Than Honouring The War Veterans, The Post-War Society As Well As The Government Distanced Itself, Regarding Them With Distrust And Shame. Benjamin Realized That Even Though They Had Successfully Overthrown The White Oppressors,

They Still Remained Colonized By The Self-Serving Black Politicians. Black Nationalism, Once A Symbol Of Emancipation And Collective Identity, Has Transformed Into An Oppressive System Of Control And Marginalization After Independence. He Feels Openly Deceived By The Black Nationalistic Ideologies And Its System, For Which He Had Fought And Continued To Believe. There Promises Of Racial Equality, Justice, And Job Opportunity Was Replaced By Greed, Corruption And Violence. Benjamin's Agony Is Illustrated In The Following Line,

The Worst Thing Is To Come Back And Find Nothing Has Changed. I Look At My Father And Mother And Brother And Sister, At The House In Which I Was Born, At The Township In Which I Grew Up – People Prefer To Call It Suburb Now – And I See The Same Old House, The Same Old Street And The Same Old Faces Struggling To Survive. We Won The War, Yes, But It's Foolish To Start Talking About Victory. All This Talk About Free Schools And Free Medical Treatment And Minimum Wages Is Just A Start. The Real Battle Will Take A Long, Long Time; It May Never Even Begin. (627)

Consequently, Benjamin Realised That Zimbabwean Independence Was Just Symbolic And Romanticized Rather Than Being Really Effective And Transformative. As Mbanefo S. Ogene And Luke Ndudi Okolo Prescribed In Their Study It Is At This Moment Benjamin "...The Once Naïve/ Ignorant/ Simple Child Or Adolescent Changes And Transforms To A Full Adult, Experienced, Possessing Knowledge, And Becomes Fully Aware Of His Social Norms And Expectation..." (20).

Subversion Of The European Bildungsroman

Chinodya Diverges From Traditional Bildungsroman Conventions By Rejecting The Idea Of Linear Progress And Embracing Circular Trajectory Of Growth And Maturity. The Story's Non-Linear Structure Like Employing Flashbacks To Trace Benjamin's Early Experiences Of Selfhood Contributes To This Distinguishing Attribute. Nation-Building Is A Central Feature Unique To African Bildungsroman And Not The Classical One. The Plot Of This Narrative Not Only Focuses On Individuation Of Benjamin But Also Sheds Light On Zimbabwe's Past Simultaneously. As Okuyade States, "The Child-Figure Has Artistically Become A Metaphor For Calibrating The Development Of The Continent As The Development Of The Child Is Structurally Constructed To Metaphorically Parallel That Of The Nation"(118). Benjamin's Personal Development Is Linked To Zimbabwe's Political And Socio-Economic Realities, Invoking A Collective Focus Rather Than Only Concentrating On The Internal Awakening Of The Protagonist Like That Of The Classical One.

Another Distinguishing Trait Of Postcolonial Bildungsroman Is Its Ending In Ambiguity And Lack Of Clear Resolution. The Novel Ends In An Open-Ended Cliff-Hanger. Benjamin Is Left Questioning, Disillusioned And Ideologically Confused. Ironically, His Ongoing Struggle Mirrors The Plight Of The Postcolonial Populace. The Novel Also Lacks A Harmonious Re-Integration With The Society. Benjamin's Search Of Selfhood Only Leads To Fragmented Identities. Throughout The Novel, He Oscillates Between Conflicting

Cultural And Ideological Influences Like His Lost Shona Heritage, Christian Morality, Colonial Education And Revolutionary Ideology. His Condition Of Hybridity And Identity Crisis Is Distinctively Postcolonial And Is Absent Classical Bildungsroman.

Conclusion

This study enhances our understanding of the postcolonial variation of the Bildungsroman. The postcolonial Bildungsroman has emerged as a fictional tool of socio-political and creative resistance. As Mbanefo S. Ogene and Luke Ndudi Okolo states, "...African Bildungsroman from its inception as colonial and post-independent novels have always been a tool in the hands of the novelist via which the novelists puts up one form of resistance or holistic change of one issue or more, bothering politics, identity, migration, et cetera" (6). Shimmer Chinodya has efficiently subverted the European genre to reflect Zimbabwean realities and the complexities of maturation in a postcolonial nation. Overall, this article paints a clear image of how the postcolonial Bildungsroman differs from its classical European counterpart.

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