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Exalted and Debased: Psychological/Sexual Conflict as Bildungsroman in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

While many still view the Bildungsroman as the purview of stuffy formation novels like Dickens or Joyce, there is significant scholarship that suggests a recent revolution in the genre that centers women, people of color and males in post-colonial or war-torn spaces. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* is usually cited as her primary example of a postcolonial (female) Bildungsroman, yet there is a dearth of literary criticism that focuses on the Bildungsroman aspects of her Nigerian-Biafran Civil War set *Half of a Yellow Sun*. *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s main focalization of Ugwu charts certain traditional aspects of a Bildungsroman set in a post-colonial space. This paper will examine Ugwu's focalization as Bildungsroman, focusing specifically on his psychological and sexual conflict. It will also explore the underlying events that led to Biafran secession and review first person narratives of conscripted child soldiers of the Biafran War.

This paper will argue that Ugwu's Bildungsroman required two psychologically conflicting sexual experiences, one exultant, the other debasing, to initiate the psychological death of Ugwu that would eventually become the foundation of his rebirth, through redemption and atonement, allowing Ugwu to continue his Bildung to maturity. Ultimately, Ugwu becomes a product of a new Nigeria, neither simply Biafran nor Nigerian, but a composite of the conflicting complexities of the rural/urban, anachronistic/modern, and innocent/spoiled psychological landscapes of a war-torn post-colonial space.

BILDUNGSROMAN

While the term Bildungsroman, or “formation novel”, first appeared in literary criticism in 1870, it was subsequently applied to a great swath of European literature from the late 18th and 19th centuries, namely, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795), Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), which Adichie slyly inserts into the latter section of *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an example of an American Bildungsroman (Duran 124, Boes 230, 231)¹.

According to Jerome Hamilton Buckley, the definitive scholar on Bildungsroman in British literature, the traditional European Bildungsroman of the 20th century is marked by four distinct periods: the call, or awakening, the apprenticeship, or education, the sexual and psychological conflict with society, and finally, the maturation (Boes, 231). However, in this paper I will be focusing on Ugwu’s sexual and psychological conflict with Biafran society which Buckley describes as involving “at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that...the hero reappraise his values” (Buckley qtd. in Lodge, 861).

Maria Karafilis argues for a more modern definition, one that supposes the Bildungsroman can be, “lifted out of its initial contest and applied productively across different historical periods, cultures, and classes (Karafilis 63). This has been the case in many post-colonial spaces and literary criticism is full of new applications of the genre from Caribbean offerings to female centered Bildungsromans.

Another more modern perspective on the genre is that “formation” not only transpires for the main character but for society as well. To steal Mark Stein’s excellent argument about

¹ I did not use the first names of Goethe and Joyce as they are “household” names in literature and nor did Boes use them.

Black British Bildungsroman from Tobias Boes' article, Ugwu's Bildungsroman, "has a dual function: it is about the formation of its protagonist as well as the transformation...of society and cultural institutions" (Boes 240). Boes delineates this distinction: "[w]hereas traditional novels of formation figure society as a normative construct, the novel of transformation portrays a dialogical process...the hero no longer merely changes with the world; instead, the world also changes with and through him" (Boes 240). As Nigeria, and later Biafra, change and devolve, Ugwu's Bildungsroman is directly affected.

THE BIAFRAN WAR

While the ultimate causes for the Biafran War have their roots in Africa before the advent of British imperialism, this discussion of Nigeria's problems post-independence will focus on a more contemporary analysis. However, it is important to note that the 1914 British amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria into one administrative state presaged the inevitable dissolution of the country evidenced by the Biafran War by combining a culturally and linguistically distinct Muslim North (Hausa) with a culturally and linguistically heterogenous Christian South (Yoruba and Igbo) (Uche 114).²

During colonization, the British had employed a divide and rule strategy further dividing the South into Eastern and Western sections in 1946, which reflected the main geographic locations of the Igbo and Yoruba populations respectively (Uche 115). Another element of the British "indirect rule" policy employed in Nigeria was to create strong regional governments, leaving a weak central government, that fomented even more regional "nationalism," and

² This is a vast oversimplification. For a more detailed analysis, see Larry Diamond's "Class, Ethnicity, and the Democratic State: Nigeria, 1950-1966 in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1983, pp. 457-489.

allowed the North, due to landmass and population, to initially become the dominant region (Post 28).

This changed in 1958 with the discovery of oil in the Eastern region and due to the reexamination of the regional revenue allocation, shifted power from regional governments to a now more powerful, and wealthy, central government. This led to North, East, and Western attempts to gain control over the central government instead of relying on their regional economies and subsidy allocations (Uche 115, 116).

The historical and political considerations that are relevant to *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Ugwu's eventual conscription, however, begin during the growing tensions between the North and South after British independence in 1960. After the 1959 election, a Northern coalition government came to power (their parliamentary seats supplemented by the Southern National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons for a majority) and this coalition ruled uneasily for the next six years (Post 28).

By January 1966, fed up with the rampant corruption and regional mindset of the Northern coalition government, young army officers, all ethnic Igbo, instigated a coup that killed mainly Northern officials. While the coup was quickly put down by more senior army commanders, the significance that the majority of the dead were Northerners who had been killed by Igbo officers was not lost on the Hausa North. They responded with their own, much more brutal coup in July of 1966 that resulted in the later massacre of hundreds of civilian Igbos living in the North in September and October of 1966 and established General Gowon, a Christian Northerner, as head of the government (Uche 119, Post 30). On May 30, 1967, after determining that the "lives and property of its citizens could not be guaranteed within Nigeria,"

the State of Biafra was created in the Eastern region and officially seceded from Nigeria (Uchendu 395, Post 30).

CONSCRIPTED CHILD SOLDIERS IN BIAFRA: RECOLLECTIONS

The heart wrenching and meticulously researched article by Egodi Uchendu, “Recollections of Childhood Experiences during the Nigerian Civil War,” interviews child soldiers and conscripts that were between the ages of 15-18 during the Biafran War.³ Ocha, a fifty-two-year-old former soldier, remembers being excited and “anxious to go and defend my fatherland and protest for what was my right as we were told to do by the leaders of Biafra” (Uchendu 397). This very closely resembles Ugwu’s feelings when he listens to initial war reports on Radio Biafra: “Ugwu...wished, again, that he could join the Civil Defense League or the militia...the war reports had become the highlights of his day” (Adichie 248). Similarly, Ugwu “longed to play a role, to act...win the war” (Adichie 249).

However, the real life shift from war fantasy to child conscription horror began quickly, only three months into the war, when an order came from Ojukwu that “stipulated that the men should ‘come with anything they could lay hands on, which might kill or wound - dane guns, machetes, clubs knives” within twenty four hours to Enugu to shore up defenses (Akpan, qtd. in Uchendu 401). Uchendu marks “this desperate call for men...as the first official demand for all classes of volunteers - irrespective of age, experience and capability - and as a strategy to harness all available human resources to the war effort” (Uchendu 401).

Uchendu notes that “conscription drives commenced in different parts of Igboland from November 1967” for children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen (Uchendu 401). Uchendu

³ While this article shares many stories with *Half of a Yellow Sun*, including Adichie’s story of the woman on the train with the head in a calabash, the article was published a year after *Half of a Yellow Sun* and so the original material must be a shared source that is either John De St. Jorre’s book *The Nigerian Civil War* or Alexander Madiebo’s *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*.

was able to record “Kere’s” recollection of his conscription at fifteen: “One day I strolled out and what I heard was: Hey! Hey!! Don’t move. If you move, I shoot!!!...we were hastily trained for three weeks...we received our uniforms and rifles...but without...belt or helmet...[and] driven straight to the front” (Uchendu 401-402). This experience is eerily reminiscent of Ugwu’s forced conscription as he returns from walked Eberechi home and his haphazard military training.

Uchendu also discusses the relationship between Biafran soldiers and local Biafran women. While there were many arrangements, whether entered into willingly or not (and most were not), the women henceforth bore the same mark of shame and social stigmatization: “Most acts of prostitution and cohabitation were not initiated by the girls. There were many cases of abduction by federal soldiers in Biafra...In instances where soldiers directly approached girls, resistance could result in death...society...pitied those forcefully abused who...became socially tainted” (Uchendu 409).

UGWU’S SEXUAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT: EXALTED AND DEBASED

Buckley maintains in his definition of the traditional Bildungsroman that the hero must garner sexual experiences of an exalted and a debased nature (Lodge 861). However, Aghogho Akpome has a more nuanced argument for Ugwu’s focalization as Bildungsroman: “Ugwu’s metamorphosis from an innocent, impressionable illiterate adolescent at the beginning of the narrative to an informed, cynical young adult writer at its end is what most eloquently marks the novel as an example of the *bildungsroman*” (Akpome 33).

EXALTED

Ugwu’s wooing of Eberechi, his neighbor across the street from the family’s new lodgings in Umuahia as they flee the War, begins incrementally. Ugwu’s first romantic feelings

for Eberechi manifest at Odenigbo and Olanna's wedding when Ugwu imagines himself marrying, first, "Olanna and then...Nnesinachi and then...Eberechi with perfectly rounded buttocks" (Adichie 252). Later, Ugwu tries to impress Eberechi with his teaching prestige: "when he saw her standing...watching him teach, he would raise his voice and pronounce his words more carefully" (Adichie 368). Eventually it begins to pay off, Ugwu loving "most of all, the teasing way Eberechi called him *teacher*...she was impressed" (Adichie 368).

Ugwu, now with a foot in the door, begins to ply Eberechi with presents of "milk and sugar" and Olanna's "scented talcum powder" but fails to impress her with these (precious) gifts (Adichie 368). But even though she mocks his gifts this exchange somehow allows Ugwu to finally feel "completely at ease in her presence" (Adichie 369). Finally, the walls disappear between them and Eberechi tells Ugwu about her rape by the army colonel her parents gifted her to: "He did it quickly and then told me to lie on top of him. He fell asleep and I wanted to move away and he woke up and told me to stay there. I could not sleep so the whole night I looked at the saliva coming down the side of his mouth" (Adichie 369).

This is simultaneously a pivotal moment for Ugwu's formation, the beginnings of proposed sexual exaltation with Eberechi, and a foreshadowing of the second aspect of Ugwu's formation during conflict, rape as sexual debasement. Ugwu is angry both at her experience and himself for initially fantasizing about her sexually but Ugwu imagines their future sexual experience would be gentle and healing for her. Ugwu thought "about him and Eberechi in bed, how different it would be from her experience with the colonel. He would treat her with the respect she deserved and do only what she liked, only what she wanted him to do" (Adichie 369).

The secondary importance of Ugwu's relationship with Eberечи is that Ugwu begins to make his own choices independent from the family, beginning to assert his own self-interest and taking steps necessary for his continuing Bildung. After Olanna saves Ugwu from conscription, using all of the family's money to do so, Ugwu still defies Olanna's orders not to leave the apartment in order to walk Eberечи home. However, it is not just base "consummation" of their relationship that Ugwu seeks with Eberечи. Ugwu had an exclusively sexual relationship with the neighbor house girl, Chinyere, in Nsukka that left him emotionally unfulfilled; with Eberечи, he finds his first taste of young adult love. First, though, Ugwu must forgive Eberечи for her supposed liaison with the anonymous army officer. It is the death of Professor Ekwenugo that solves this crisis in Ugwu; he "believe[s] now in preciousness" (Adichie 445). Ugwu allows himself to break down in Eberечи's presence and mourn Ekwenugo and this begins their short relationship of brief touches of "exquisite joys" (Adichie 446). It is on the very day of his conscription that Ugwu kisses Eberечи for the first time and realizes "he love[s] her [and] he want[s] to tell her that he love[s] her" (Adichie 446). However, because Ugwu has not yet reached the maturity stage of his Bildung yet, he does not profess his love to Eberечи. Instead, Ugwu must move on to the second aspect of Bildung conflict resolution, the debased sexual encounter. So, he is both rewarded and punished: rewarded with a kiss and Eberечи's affections and punished for contravening Olanna's orders.

DEBASED

Once conscripted, Eberечи is Ugwu's imaginary companion and conscience. He longs to tell her of the commander's "full uniform, sharply ironed and stiff" and sees her in the women that visit the commander's compound that leave with "sheepish smiles" (Adichie 451). It is actually for Eberечи that Ugwu initially begins to write and in searching for scraps to jot down

his day to day activities, finds the American Bildungsroman of Frederick Douglass. But in order to foment the next stage of Bildung, according to Buckley, Ugwu's "exalted" love of Eberechi must be blotted out so that Ugwu may continue in his evolution. This is seemingly accomplished by the rape of a bar maid by Ugwu and his fellow soldiers.

Even immediately before the rape, Ugwu's sense of morality is still partly intact as he protects the man whose car they steal from being beaten to death saying, "it is enough" (Adichie 456). But Ugwu's hold on himself begins to slip as he is constantly faced with the devaluation of everything he holds dear. Interestingly, Ogaga Okuyade makes the case that the journey of the "hero" in contemporary Nigerian Bildungsroman novels are "usually physical and psychological, the environment in which they find themselves influences their worldviews at any given time." (Okuyade 142).

When High Tech uses the first page of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as a rolling paper, it breaks something in Ugwu. The casual disdain with which the soldiers greet the world begins to infect Ugwu. However, Okuyade seems to account for this, arguing that protagonists of "third generation" Nigerian novels "develop a *modus vivendi* in the "war" in which they have been implicated as...actors and victims" (Okuyade 142). This provides insight into Ugwu's descent into immorality and debasement at the bar. In an ever-changing world comprised of chaos, depravity, and lack of basic values even Ugwu (or as Adichie seems to be saying, any one of us) can be tainted, compromised, or implicated in degradation.

However, Buckley's definition of a traditional Bildungsroman would necessitate that the question posed to Ugwu, "Target Destroyer, aren't you a man?" that prompts him to join the rape of the barmaid, is the lynchpin in Ugwu's next step of formation (Adichie 458). I posit, instead,

that the line “a self-loathing release” just three sentences later, is the most telling aspect of Ugwu’s *Bildung* and why Ugwu (and the reader) can eventually forgive himself (Adichie 458).

Ngũgĩ’s assertion that “how people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and...at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings,” applies conspicuously to Ugwu’s psyche and his *Bildung* after the rape (Ngũgĩ 857). While Ugwu is terrified of Kainene, Olanna, and Odenigbo eventually finding out about the rape, it is his own self-loathing and anger towards himself that actually propels him forward on his journey of formation, not the “debasement” itself. The difference between Ugwu and his fellow soldiers is that Ugwu knows, before, during and after, the rape, like the beating of the owner of the car, is morally depraved. After a psychological death and rebirth, achieved through atonement and redemption, Ugwu has the opportunity to reach the next stage in his *Bildung*, maturity.

DEATH AND REBIRTH

The next stage of Ugwu’s *Bildungsroman*, after sexual debasement is a moral and psychological death, an annihilation of self, that allows for rebirth and the evolution of the final stage of *Bildung*, maturity. Yet even before Ugwu’s metaphorical death, Ugwu has already started to psychologically unravel. He “luxuriat[ed]...in the mud” and “touched his own skin and thought of its decay” (Adichie 458). When Ugwu actually achieves “death” on the battlefield after a particularly aggressive gambit by the Nigerian army that leaves him helpless, “stunned into silence,” it is death and heaven he ponders in his hospital bed during “lucid moments” (Adichie 460, 493). However, his psychological death does not allow him to even “visualize a heaven” or “God seated on a throne” (Adichie 493). Death terrifies Ugwu as a “complete knowingness” and yet, “not knowing beforehand what it was he would know” (Adichie 493). The campaigns after the rape had allowed him to repress the memory, to

“unwrap...his mind from his body,” but in the hospital, having nothing but time and the mental clarity of intense pain to occupy him, Ugwu begins his slow rebirth.

Ugwu’s rebirth, however, is not rebirth as *tabula rasa*, it carries his psychological and moral scars from the War and requires redemption and atonement for his sexual debasement and moral depravity. Ugwu is surprised that it is even “possible for his body to return to what it had been and for his mind to function with permanent lucidity” after what he had done (Adichie 497). Ugwu understands the foundation of this rebirth and second chance as a way to do penance for the sins of his past:

In that gray space between dreaming and daydreaming, where he controlled most of what he imagined, he saw the bar, smelled the alcohol, and heard the soldiers saying “Target Destroyer,” but it was not the bar girl that lay with her back on the floor, it was Eberechi. He woke up hating the image and hating himself. He would give himself time to atone for what he had done. Then he would go and look for Eberechi. (Adichie 497)

REDEMPTION AND ATONEMENT

Ugwu achieves the beginnings of atonement working in Kainene’s camp and redemption through writing. While working at the camp, there is a sudden air raid and almost as if the old Ugwu and the reflexes of the new Ugwu merged, he unthinkingly “reached out and pulled the child from the woman’s embrace and ran...his mother had no choice but to follow” (Adichie 501). It is also inevitably Ugwu’s duty to bury this child he has saved. While he recovers at Kainene’s and works at the camp, Ugwu strikes optimistic deals with himself: “...Eberechi would wait for him...her waiting for him was proof of his redemption” (Adichie 497).

It is at this point that Ugwu begins to write, everywhere, on anything. At first, it is unfocused scribbling, “a poem about people getting a buttocks rash...about a young woman with a perfect backside who pinched the neck of a young man” (Adichie 498). But, soon Ugwu begins, unknowingly, to write his biggest source of redemption, “the book.” His first entry is

jotting down, in exquisite and earnest detail, Olanna's story about the head in the calabash on the train. What Ugwu realizes is that "...the more he wrote the less he dreamed" (Adichie 498).

When Ugwu relieves Richard of his book title it is an act of both self-loathing and redemption: "Later, Ugwu murmured the title to himself: *The World Was Silent When We Died*. It haunted him, filled him with shame. It made him think about that girl in the bar, her pinched face and the hate in her eyes as she lay on her back on the dirty floor" (Adichie 496).

What is most significant about this stage in Ugwu's Bildung is that the reader cannot yet know that the author of the "metabook" is Ugwu until he has redeemed himself to the reader and completed his journey of formation. It is clear that that has not yet happened when Ugwu asks Richard to ferry a letter to Eberechi in Umuahia after the Biafran War is over. Were Ugwu to have completed his penance, he would be able to go to Eberechi himself, but he is not yet finished. Ugwu does not enter maturity and complete his Bildungsroman until the last sentence of the novel when, some time in the future, exhibiting both affectionate humor and an ironic turn of phrase, Ugwu dedicates his novel, *The World Was Silent When We Died*, "For Master, my good man" (Adichie 541).

CONCLUSION

While Ugwu's focalization in *Half of a Yellow Sun* may not be a traditional British Bildungsroman, it fits neatly into the more modern definitions of Karafilis, Akpome, and Okuyade. By mirroring Ugwu's changing environment and moral development during the War, while negotiating a "modus vivendi," Ugwu's psychological and sexual conflict, through the exaltation of Eberechi and the debasement of the rape, precipitated his evolution to the next stage of his Bildung, maturity. The psychological death that resulted from the rape induced Ugwu down a path of atonement and redemption that were the true hallmarks of his evolution. While

the reader never sees Ugwu fully redeemed during the timeframe of the novel, they get a glimpse of the future mature artist, who, by virtue of his redemption, creates a Bildungsroman of a modern Nigeria.

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