

Nigerian women growing up: *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the works of two contemporary Nigerian writers – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* – as *Bildungsromane*. Through a comparative analysis, it outlines the ways in which contemporary Nigerian women novelists, by proceeding along the well-trodden path of their foremothers, explore the female subjectivity by providing portraits of emerging Nigerian young women who struggle to define themselves beyond the subaltern role patriarchal society has designed for them. By choosing to represent the metamorphosis of young female characters in their writings, Adichie and Shoneyin explore not only gender issues but also the question of identity formation and human rights. These narratives of growth therefore map the process of 'womaning' undergone by the protagonists, who, in their journey of self-discovery, acquire an awareness of the dominant social order and value system while refusing to conform to them. Hence, I argue that the Nigerian variant of the *Bildungsroman* offers a model of resistance to women's subjugation by demonstrating that it is possible – whether successfully or unsuccessfully – to claim their rights and assert their position within society.

Keywords

Bildungsroman, African womanism, gender roles, human rights, third generation of African women writers

Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the ways in which two contemporary Nigerian female novelists, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Lola Shoneyin, portray the growth of their characters through the subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation. In this sense, it outlines how, in spite of the similarities with the Western female *Bildungsroman*, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* Africanize a western-oriented narrative form within a postcolonial context to recount the African experience (Okuyade 2011a, 142).

The term *Bildungsroman* was coined in 1817 by Karl von Morgenstern though it was not applied until the end of the nineteenth century. The word *Bildung* is a German expression which carries on several connotational meanings such as "formation," "picture" and "shape," whose deeper meaning is in every case related to the idea of development or creation. By undergoing stages of conflict and growth, the protagonist is tested by crises and love affairs which finally lead him/her to find the best place to use his/her unique talents. In its didactic

function, the *Bildungsroman* literary genre thus charts the protagonist's process of psychological and moral growth from childhood into maturity.

However, the predominant focus given to the male protagonists in the *Bildungsroman* genre has led several feminists to offer a new definition of the literary genre that includes female protagonists. Feminist critics, such as Elizabeth Langland, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Abel, have pointed out how the female protagonist's journey to adulthood deviate from that experienced by male protagonists (Billston 2004, 70). The concerns evoked in the female novel of development indeed reflect a form of alienation different from the one experienced by the male protagonist. These narratives, therefore, portray "the material disempowerment of women and the repressive social expectations placed on [them]," which resulted in a disruption between the self perceived by the heroine and "the self that [was] reflected back to her by other people's expectations" (Ellis 1999, 23). The female *Bildungsroman*, by providing a model for a woman's development, bridges the gap between the heroine's self-perception and the social expectations while, at the same time, offering women a perspective of their circumscribed role within society and the means to manipulate societal expectations in order to overcome such constrictions.

This aspect of the novel of formation, along with its focus on the self and its development, is recalled in the Nigerian contemporary narratives and readapted to the postcolonial context. Similarly to the Western novel of formation, the African female *Bildungsroman* thematizes gender "as the central problem for women attempting to reconcile individual and social demands" (Felski 1989, 122). Yet, in spite of the underlying affinities between the Western and African female *Bildungsroman*, there are some fundamental distinctions to be made which contribute to rendering the latter a peculiar and divergent genre, thus problematizing its definition as a monolithic literary genre. In these terms, the following paragraphs illustrate the ways in which the Nigerian *Bildungsroman* differs from the "classic" European one.

Theoretical considerations about the Nigerian female *Bildungsroman*

If traditionally the *Bildungsroman* presupposes the integration of the individual in the social group, the African *Bildungsroman* tends to deviate from such resolution. Dialogically engaged with precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history, the African coming-of-age novel does not always assume the protagonist's congruence with society and its conventions. In this sense, the African novel of formation questions the very tradition from which it derives.

In examining African *Bildungsromane*, critics of African literature have noticed that, unlike the European model, it lacks an important key element: "a strong sense of individualism and introspection" (Austen 2015, 216). Indeed, what emerges from African variants is the representation of "collective identities in form of autobiographical writing as a weapon in forming a subjectivity" (216). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the early European *Bildungsroman* presented a triumphalist assertion of the individual, while the African

Bildungsroman characteristically “abandons its protagonist at the threshold between youth and the beginning of maturity, seldom making clear how this next stage will be fulfilled” (Austen 2015, 222). An ending that reflects the “suspended liminality” between stages of development as well as between the European and African world. These narratives thus depict a hybrid context in which the individual and collective effort to bridge the gap between often opposing cultural identity and influences are brought to light (Adesola Mafe 2012, 22).

Furthermore, it is essential to point out that the Nigerian female *Bildungsroman* not only outlines the process which leads their characters to identity formation and self-realization, but it also thematizes the “inequality that the protagonist experiences in terms of social options” (Šnircová 2017, 16). In this sense, a communal factor which emerges from these narratives is the multilayered forms of oppression specifically experienced by the black woman. For this reason, many Nigerian novelists have found it difficult to agree with Western feminist ideas. Indeed, though both systems of thought share the common aim of acquiring gender equality, it is, however, also true that Western feminism priorities differ from those of the African woman. The gender-centered position of Western feminists, along with the fact that white women, as members of Western societies – and even sometimes due to their individual behavior contribute to other forms of oppression of African women (and men) – has led African women to dissociate themselves from such an approach. As Chikwenye Ogunyemi points out, Western feminism does not take into account the African diverse political, economic, cultural and social context as well as it fails to consider the issues related to racism, neocolonialism, (cultural) imperialism, capitalism, religious fundamentalism, and dictatorial and corrupt systems. For this reason, in 1985 Ogunyemi coined the expression ‘African womanism’, a variety of African feminism that takes into account the precolonial and postcolonial situation of Africa. Centered on race, motherhood, and familial bonds, African womanism includes men and children in the process of social change. By drawing a demarcation line from Western feminism and the concept of African American womanism as proposed by Alice Walker,¹ Ogunyemi sought to elaborate a theoretical framework that addresses African women, since “only African women may be African womanist in Ogunyemi’s sense” (Arndt 2000, 711-712). Ogunyemi’s concept of womanism is summarised in four Cs: “Consensus, Collaboration, Complementarity and Conciliation” (Coller 2013, 108). More specifically, on complementarity, she underlines the importance of building a meaningful union between men and women (108). Because, when analyzed on a global level, “African men are oppressed just as women are oppressed” (Arndt 2000, 721). The inclusion of men in the process of social change helps to improve the existing gender relationships. This is an aspect which is clearly brought to light in *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, where the female characters are not the only ones portrayed as being active agents of change, but men as well are presented as being promoters of female empowerment.

By calling upon womanist principles, which involve women as well as men in the process

of social change, the third generation of Nigerian female novelists are standing against the violation of human rights at a global level.² In particular, the *Bildungsroman* literary genre becomes a powerful weapon for contemporary African female writers to speak about inequalities, racial discrimination, injustice, women subjugation, and human rights abuses. As Joseph Slaughter argues in *Human Rights, Inc.*, “[b]oth the *Bildungsroman* and human rights law recognize and construct the individual as a social creature” (2007, 20), thus demonstrating the confluence between the two since both are concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. The *Bildungsroman* through the narrative form makes human rights legible, since “both share in their comparable idealist articulations of free and full human personality development as the working-out of the state/citizen bind” (94). In this regard, Slaughter asserts that “both human rights law and the *Bildungsroman* posit the nation-state as the highest form of expression of human sociality and the citizen as the highest form of expression of human personality” (94). Because of its supposedly ‘civilizing’ character, the *Bildungsroman* has been used by the third generation of Nigerian female writers to mark the progressive metamorphosis of their protagonists as well as their personal journey towards self-awareness of the complex Nigerian socio-cultural principles in which they have to live. Through the exploration of female subjectivity, what these narratives bring to light is the social and psychological forces contributing to individual development (Okuyade 2011a, 142-145). In this sense, *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* chart the growth of their female protagonists, respectively Kambili and Bolanle, who are initially depicted as being socially, psychologically and culturally exploited. Through the ability of self-reflection, typical of the *Bildungsroman*, both characters acquire the capacity to learn and grow from their experiences. The journey towards self-discovery eventually leads them from being passive figures to active agents who exercise control over their own lives (Nadaswaran 2011, 25).

Breaking the yoke of silence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* is recounted by the first-person narrator Kambili, who tells her family’s life and history in modern Nigeria (Mabura 2008, 206). The novel, which begins in *medias res*, proceeds through flashbacks in order to explore the dynamics that lead to Jaja’s defiance of Eugene’s authoritarian attitude. In order to emphasize Kambili’s as well as Jaja’s and Beatrice’s development, Adichie chooses to break the narrative time scheme into four parts. The initial part, entitled “Palm Sunday: Breaking Gods,” marks when “[t]hings started to fall apart” (Adichie 2004, 3) and it represents a turning point in the lives of Kambili and her brother Jaja as they finally acknowledge their father’s vulnerability and fallibility (Kearney 2012, 138). The second part, entitled “Speaking with our Spirits – Before Palm Sunday,” is the longest section and focuses on the children’s lives before Palm Sunday, including their visit to their paternal Grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, and their aunt Ifeoma, both of whom are to have a major influence on them. The penultimate, fairly brief part, “The Pieces of Gods – After Palm

Sunday,” is centered on the events after the Palm Sunday crisis and, more specifically, describes the departure of Ifeoma (and her children) along with the Nsukka local priest Father Amadi, together with Eugene’s poisoning by his desperate wife Beatrice. In the final section, “A different Silence – The Present,” which is as brief as the first one, Kambili narrates the aftermath of Eugene’s poisoning.

Starting with the analysis of the purple hibiscus of the title, it is evident how this plant draws upon a symbolic meaning as it represents the children’s opportunity to free themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. Not surprisingly, in all the settings of the novel – Enugu, Abba town, and Nsukka – the presence of the hibiscuses is mentioned. However, it is in Aunty Ifeoma’s domain that for the first time the children see the unusual hibiscus described as being characterized by a “deep shade of purple” (Adichie 2004, 129). The peculiar flower immediately captures Jaja’s interest, who likes the purple hibiscus to the point that he wraps stalks of it in a black cellophane paper for their gardener in Enugu. Again, Jaja is the one who notices when the purple hibiscus is about to bloom, just the day before Palm Sunday – “the day Jaja did not go to the communion, the day Papa threw his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines” (253). Hence, the narrator is drawing an explicit connection between the one who shows interest in the hibiscuses and the one who revolts against his father’s will on Palm Sunday (Kaboré 2013, 35). In this regard, it could be argued that such a pivotal role attributed to the character of Jaja reflects the African womanist ideology, which posits not only women as active promoters of change, but men as well. In this sense, Ogunyemi claims that: “the intelligent black woman writer, conscious of black impotence in the context of the white patriarchal culture, empowers the black man. She believes in him; hence her book ends in integrative images of the male and female worlds” (Phillips 2006, 25). Yet it is noteworthy that even when Jaja’s actions are crucial in determining the challenge of Eugene’s oppressive patriarchal system, the chief focalizer still remains Kambili, hence making clear Adichie’s feminist intent (Kearney 2012, 138).

It is in Nsukka that Jaja begins to build up his courage as both children seek the opportunity to achieve freedom. For this reason, Kambili traces the beginning of when things started to fall apart to Aunty Ifeoma’s little garden in Nsukka:

Nsukka started it all; Aunty Ifeoma’s little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma’s experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowd waving green leaves chanted at the Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (Adichie 2004, 16)

The hibiscus epitomizes the “courage to effect change” as well as the “long-sought freedom” (Kaboré 2013, 35-36), symbolizing the time Kambili and Jaja spent in Nsukka, as well as the change undergone by the two children who, free from complying with the rigid schedule devised by Eugene, acquire the courage to fight for their liberty.

The children's stay in Nsukka is thus crucial in conditioning their change of mindset, as it introduces them to another entirely different environment in which laughter – rather than the fearful silence that presided over their home in Enugu – resonated (Kearney 2012, 140). It is indeed in Aunty Ifeoma's house that Kambili, by becoming familiar with her grandfather and with Igbo's traditions, learns how to "draw on her roots and cultivate her hybridity" (Hron 2008, 33-34). As Kambili listens to her grandfather's storytelling or observes him performing the *itunzu* – a mourning prayer to his ancestors similar to saying a rosary – she comes to understand different practices and values (33). Hence, she learns from Aunty Ifeoma that, "sometimes what [is] different [is] just as good as what [is] familiar" (Adichie 2004, 166). From this moment on Kambili, who previously only recognized her father's fixed perspective of reality – which juxtaposed Catholicism to paganism – realizes that he might not always be right and thus learns to embrace her indigenous culture rather than rejecting it.

A further notable aspect is that, when Kambili arrives in Nsukka, she is literally an *infant*: incapable of speech. She stutters (143) and often struggles to give voice to her thoughts as her lips are stubbornly held together (141), an aspect that is repeatedly stressed right from the beginning of the novel. If the reader is initially provided only with a few hints regarding the malaise which looms over the Achike family, as the story unfolds the unspoken secrets, such as Beatrice's multiple miscarriages and Jaja's deformed finger, are gradually revealed. Similarly to several writers of the third generation who explore the issue of violated bodies in their writings, Adichie has developed what Pius Adesanmi defines as an "aesthetics of pain" (Hewett 2005, 81). In these terms, each of the characters carries emotional and physical scars which are kept secret within the family (Mtenje 2016, 70). In particular, the continuous physical abuses endured by Beatrice, Kambili, and her brother Jaja mirror the Nigerian social context, which is dominated by internal disruptions. In this sense, it could be argued that the Achike family is presented as a "microcosm of a nation [...] in need of reform" (Stobie 2010, 423).

It could be argued that in *Purple Hibiscus* silence epitomizes the mechanism of patriarchal control. Eugene's oppressive figure – who within the nuclear-family pronounces the "Law of the father" (Stobie 2010, 426) – creates a "cyst around them, which makes rays from the outside impenetrable" (Okuyade 2009, 249). In particular, Kambili's mother, Beatrice, is initially presented as a figure who totally conforms to patriarchal values. Being socially and economically dependent on her abusive husband, she is trapped in a patriarchal order which prevents her from acquiring the social and economic freedom to move out of her oppressed life condition. At the same time, she is afraid of losing respect as a married woman and also of leaving her prominent husband. In spite of the cruelties she endures from Eugene, Beatrice prefers to remain married, as she considers women without husbands incomplete and inadequate. Her perspective, according to which "[a] husband crowns a woman's life" (Adichie 2004, 75), therefore reflects the patriarchal ideology. In a society like Nigeria, a woman's personhood is often considered unimportant and non-existent unless she has a man to

complete and take care of her (Mtenje 2016, 68-69). Hence Adichie illustrates how, on the basis of their gender, women are oppressed and given less value. The privileging of sons over daughters is an issue which permeates the novel and reflects traditional native religion. Through the character of Papa-Nnukwu, the Nigerian indigenous culture and religion are presented to the reader as less restrictive and more life-affirming than the Catholic one. Yet Adichie does not fail to notice that the Igbo traditional culture and religion are sexist as well. Indeed, according to Papa-Nnukwu, women's culture does not count. Such conceptualization of female identity is associated with Ifeoma who, though having established herself as a university lecturer, contributing to the development of her country and family members, struggles to assert herself because her achievements are not given enough value (Mtenje 2016, 69). Yet, differently from Beatrice, Ifeoma does not conform to such patriarchal perceptions of women and thus does not desist from voicing her thoughts. In this sense, Ifeoma becomes a "demystifier of chauvinist and despotic establishments" (Okuyade 2011a, 150): she is the one who encourages Beatrice to transcend the common assumption according to which happiness is not conceived outside marriage, as when she observes that "sometimes life begins when marriage ends" (Adichie 2004, 75).

The character of Ifeoma turns out to be crucial, not only for Beatrice's development but for Kambili's as well. Having had her passive and compliant mother as a role model, who speaks in low monosyllabic tones as a result of years of abuses and subjugation, Kambili has inherited her voicelessness. She speaks only when addressed directly and her sentences usually consist of murmurs and stutters. Being used to her mother's subservient attitude, Kambili is stunned when – during Ifeoma's and her children's Christmas visit – she witnesses how her aunty addressed her father: "I watched every movement she made; I could not tear my ears away. It was the fearlessness about her, about the way she gestured as she spoke, the way she smiled to show that wide gap" (Adichie 2004, 76). As pointed out by Okuyade, this passage marks the beginning of Kambili's awakening. Like the protagonist of the female *Bildungsroman*, she initiates a "voyage inward toward a more mystical resolution of women's alienation," an alienation which derives from gender oppressive norms (Okuyade 2011, 147; Lazzaro-Weis 1993, 94). From this moment on, Kambili begins a journey in which she strives to liberate herself from psychological, cultural, and religio-graphic limitations.³ Her transition is characterized by her quest for a voice. Her several attempts to voice out her thoughts and feelings usually result in silence or murmurs. For this reason, she is viewed as abnormal by Ifeoma's children to the point that Amaka blatantly questions why she "lower[s] her voice" and "talk[s] in whispers" (Adichie 2004, 117). Kambili's and Jaja's stay in Nsukka thus renders both children self-conscious of their voicelessness and deprivations. In particular, Kambili is dazed by the cheerful atmosphere which permeates Ifeoma's domain and recounts of how "[l]aughter always rang out in Aunty Ifeoma's house" and how easily "[w]ords spurted from everyone" (Adichie 2004, 140; 120). The life-affirming environment, in which the children are finally able

to be free and no longer have to abide by the rigid schedule created by Eugene, allows them to experience a new reality, which is not dictated by fear and abuses.

It is significant that, since in the *Bildungsroman* the father figure is usually prominent, Adichie chooses Ifeoma as the crucial agent of Kambili's change. Ifeoma is, first of all, the maternal figure who offers guidance to Kambili. She helps Kambili acquire a critical perspective which enables her to distinguish right and wrong through her religious belief, and she helps her to find her "rhythm and balance in a society that is unbalanced by asymmetric gender configuration" (Kearney 2012, 140; 148). Secondly, to Kambili, she exemplifies the image of a self-reliant and independent woman in a male-dominated society. Thirdly, she fathers and mothers her children with efficiency to the point that her children hardly miss their father. Ifeoma plays an important role in determining Kambili's transition from childhood to womanhood. In *Nsukka*, Kambili learns to talk, smile, cry, laugh, joke, and sing.

The element which particularly marks Kambili's and Jaja's ongoing metamorphosis is the fact that they brought two items from their aunt's domain. Jaja brings seeds of purple hibiscus, while Kambili brings the incomplete painting of her grandfather, which has been given to her by her cousin Amaka. The painting, which represents something she dearly desired but that she could not have, becomes the link between her world and her aunt's. For this reason, when Eugene discovers her and Jaja admiring the painting, rather than denying the ownership, both children simultaneously claim it. Stunned by their attitude, Eugene destroys the painting which to him represents something ugly as it symbolizes a connection to a past which has now become a threat to him (Kearney 2012, 153-154). Yet the pieces of the destroyed painting are picked up by Kambili who obsessively tries to piece them together. The pieces epitomize freedom and also the memory of her grandfather, whom she didn't have the chance to fully know. This passage therefore is significant because it indicates the collapse of Eugene's system, witnessing the change undergone by his children. Shocked by Kambili's attitude, he abruptly and violently kicks and lashes out at her to the point that she is hospitalized. Still, it is important to note that this particular point of the novel marks the moment in which Kambili finally asserts her personhood, inheriting womanism after a traumatic event (Phillips 2006, 28) that leads to the assertion of her identity as well as to the overcoming of her limitations (Okuyade 2009, 254).

For this reason, when her mother tries to absolve Eugene's atrocious behavior by stating that her father has been by her side for three days without sleeping, Kambili turns her head, an act that, though painful and made with great effort, signals her refusal to legitimise her father's abuses: "It was hard to turn my head, but I did it and looked away" (Adichie 2004, 214). This is the moment in which Kambili seems to no longer conform to her mother's attitude and, complicity, with patriarchy. She chooses to stop listening to her mother's excuses thus signaling the initiation of her personal journey into womanhood and self-empowerment (Mtenje 2016, 71).

At the breaking point, Beatrice as well rebels against Eugene's tyrannical behavior by poisoning him to death. Partly from within, but mainly from without, the patriarch's reign is brought to an end. Eugene's death is orchestrated "from within the sanctified space of the family" (Stobie 2010, 427): the kitchen, which is usually a place of submission for women, becomes the starting point to transgress patriarchal ideology. By acting within the boundaries of the private sphere, Beatrice takes advantage of her confinement to subvert the patriarchal repressive system and liberate herself and her children from Eugene's tyranny. From this moment on, Kambili, Beatrice, and Jaja are finally able to experience a different kind of silence (Okuyade 2009, 257) – a form of silence that, contrary to the threateningly one which used to hang over their house when Eugene was alive, symbolizes freedom like "Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom" (Adichie 2004, 16).

Challenging patriarchal notions of female subjectivity in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

Similarly to Adichie, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* Lola Shoneyin chooses to narrate the story of a young protagonist and her journey towards self-empowerment. Though differing from the canonical Western definition of *Bildungsroman*, Lola Shoneyin's novel could be seen as a re-adapted Nigerian form of the novel of formation. Where Adichie mainly narrates the concerns of a teenage girl, Shoneyin focuses her attention on other issues: wife-hood and motherhood, rape and fixed borders. However, it is apparent how *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* not only revolve around the notion of transgression, but also illustrate the protagonists' personal journey towards self-discovery and self-empowerment.

Switching between a third-person omniscient and first-person narration, the novel recounts the story of a polygamous household, which is disrupted by the arrival of the fourth wife, the young, educated Bolanle. Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi and Bolanle are married to one man, Ishola Alao, known as Baba Segi. Being extremely confident in his virility, Baba Segi is concerned when he notices that, despite all his "pounding" (Shoneyin 2010, 4), his fourth wife Bolanle does not get pregnant. The first three wives, rather than sharing with Bolanle the secret behind the conception of their children, prefer to wait until Baba Segi repudiates her for her "barrenness". However, this turns out to be the wrong decision since, in the end, Baba Segi learns that he is not as virile as he thought.

Differently from *Purple Hibiscus*, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is set in an Islamic context in modern-day Nigeria. Where Adichie explores the flaws of patriarchy through the character of the fanatic Igbo catholic and monogamous Eugene, Shoneyin chooses to represent the patriarchal Yoruba culture through the Muslim and polygamous Baba Segi. Through the four female characters, Shoneyin tackles from within the foundation of patriarchal

structure while, simultaneously, exposing how in the name of it women are subordinated and oppressed. By employing the narrative device of the first-person narrator, Shoneyin gives each woman a voice and thus allows each of the female characters to tell her own story.

Iya Femi lost her parents as a child and was thereafter sold by her uncle to a wealthy family, a decision which was taken by him on the assumption that “a girl cannot inherit her father’s house” (Shoneyin 2010, 121). Forced to endure domestic slavery, Iya Femi sees herself denied the opportunity to receive an education as her father wanted. Subjected to the tyrannical and cruel behavior of the matriarch to whom she simply refers as “Grandma,” Iya Femi desperately seeks a way to escape from this humiliating situation. For this reason, as soon as she notices Baba Segi – and comes to know from his driver, Taju, that he is a wealthy man – Iya Femi begs him to help her convince Baba Segi to marry her: “Then *make* him marry me. Convince him and put me in your debt forever. I have no relatives so there is no one for him to pay homage to” (Shoneyin 2010, 129). Iya Femi’s story certainly reveals a lot about the condition of a trapped woman, as marriage becomes her only way to escape the misery of her life. Through the examination of her story, the reader is invited to interrogate and ruminate on cultural practices which – by virtue of her sex – deny her access to her father’s property. Hence, the source of her economic dependence is caused by her inability to inherit her father’s wealth. As observed by Chielozona Eze: “Would she have needed to beg a man to marry her if she had had the means to sustain herself economically?” (2015, 320). It is therefore evident that her necessity to be wedded to a married man originates from her attempt to stay alive in a society which has limited space for her.

Similarly to Iya Femi, Iya Tope as well is obliged to get married by circumstances. Since the drought has destroyed her family’s crops, Iya Tope’s father – who was a farmer at the service of Baba Segi – decides to give his daughter to Baba Segi in order to repay his debt. Treated as a commodity, she is depicted by her father to Baba Segi as being “strong as three donkeys” as well as meticulous, though not witty (Shoneyin 2010, 82). Influenced by the utilitarian language employed by her father, Iya Tope describes herself as being like tubers of cassava: “I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less” (Shoneyin 2010, 82). Certain of the fact that he has acquired a valuable commodity, Baba Segi describes Iya Tope in the same mercantile language. As he begins to notice that Iya Tope does not get pregnant, he is concerned and therefore warns her: “If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him” (Shoneyin 2010, 84). In order to secure her position within the polygamous household, Iya Tope begins an affair with a meat-seller. From this liaison, three daughters are conceived who ensure her an “easy life” (Shoneyin 2010, 87) and a secured position in the polygamous marriage.

Differently from the other wives, Iya Segi, who is presented as the first wife, is not weakened by the economic wealth Baba Segi offers. Actually, she is the one who helps Baba

Segi set up his business. Having worked hard and “aggressively” like a man in her youth, Iya Segi has made a considerable amount of money that enables her to secure herself a place in Baba Segi’s home. Though she is the true provider of the family, she needs a man by her side in order to be taken into consideration as a person in society, as “[t]he world has no patience for spinsters. It spits them out” (Shoneyin 2010, 101). Living in a patriarchal society, Iya Segi is forced to conform to its oppressive ideology and therefore complies to its rules by deciding to get married and beget children (Eze 2015, 321). Yet she dreams of the moment “Baba Segi will breathe his last one day” (Shoneyin 2010, 104) and her money will return to her: “Do not say I am greedy because I am not. It’s just that as my money grows, my path to freedom becomes clearer. Everybody wants to be free from whatever binds them” (Shoneyin 2010, 105). However, the arrival of the fourth wife, Bolanle, threatens to subvert her plans along with the peace of the household, since there is the risk that the secret which binds the first three wives together might leap out.

Similarly to the other wives, Bolanle’s choice to embark on a polygynous relationship is dictated by the necessity to seek a refuge that will lead her to the fulfillment and understanding of herself. The polygamous marriage serves as a way out from her dysfunctional monogamous modern family and the secret of her rape and abortion. However, differently from the first three wives, she is a graduate and therefore her decision to marry Baba Segi is not determined by social and economic constraints. Having been raped when she was fifteen, the marriage becomes a place where to find the shelter she needs in order to heal from her past experience (Moolla 2017, 83; 84). This aspect is made evident as she openly confronts her mother by telling her about the traumatic experience which left her violated self like a broken egg: “Mama, you were living with an empty shell. Everything was scraped out of me. I was inside out” (Shoneyin 2010, 150). It is significant that finally, after years of silence, Bolanle opens up to her mother about her being sexually abused. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, there are elevated numbers of women who have been victims of sexual abuses. Yet, no one speaks about it. Despite the silence that apparently ‘condones’ such shameful acts, several African women novelists have denounced such a reprehensible act by describing the psychological effects following sexual abuse.

Bolanle’s decision to embark upon a polygamous marriage to find a place where to seek refuge and healing, in order to become whole again, is not the right choice. In fact, her condition gets even worse rather than improving. Bolanle is presented as a victim of repetitive rape by her husband who exhibits aggressive sexual behavior:

It must have been my vulnerability that aroused him because he returned at midnight to hammer me like never before. He emptied his testicles as deep into my womb as possible. It was as if he wanted to make it clear, with every thrust, that he didn’t make light of his husbandly duties. He wanted to fuck me pregnant. If there was ever a moment when the memory of being raped became fresh in my mind, that was it. (Shoneyin 2010, 43-44)

It is clear that her role in the Alao household is restricted to sex and reproduction. When a woman fails to perform her job, namely, reproduction, then she is stigmatized as “barren” since “it is every woman’s life purpose to bear children” (Shoneyin 2010, p. 101). In such a patriarchal society, the woman is viewed as a commodity and therefore she is expected not only to beget children, but also to satisfy the sexual appetite of her husband. Legitimized by such ideology and driven by his sexual impulses, Baba Segi “hammers” his wives, regardless of the emotional and physical damages these impulses might inflict. This aspect leads to another major central issue in African women’s writing: sexuality and, more particularly, the violation of women’s bodies. Like *Purple Hibiscus*, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi Wives* is centered on the body and more specifically, on the body as a violated space (Eze 2015, 317). In this sense, Chielozona Eze observes that African women narrate stories of *disabled bodies* as “[a]ny action, condition or system that renders a body or mind incapable of exercising its freedom or realizing its possibilities, disables that body or mind” (2016, 6). Though being a woman is not a disability, in such sexist society – like the one portrayed in the novel – the female embodiment becomes a handicap. Women’s lives are indeed shaped by society’s idea of femininity which delimits their freedom and agency. These socially constructed limitations are often legitimised by culture and tradition. Within this social construct, women are forced to live in conformity to the norms of patriarchal society, and – given that men establish the paradigms of social existence – they always construct them according to their advantage. Yet when socio-cultural apparatuses are designated to serve men’s biology, this certainly works to the disadvantage of women. Hence, it is clear how Shoneyin’s intent is to expose the flaws of patriarchy that annihilates women’s attempts to assert themselves in a society that does not recognise their personhood.

The novel also bestows the means through which women can challenge patriarchy: education. Education is presented as fundamental for women in order to challenge the dominant social order and system which undermines them. Being Bolanle an educated woman, she personifies the promising Nigerian woman “whose reliance on education and scientific thinking diminishes the power of her male counterpart.” It is significant therefore that the arrival of Bolanle, a university graduate, marks a turning point in the discovery of Baba Segi’s infertility. Bolanle, differently from the first wife, opts for a medical test and Baba Segi consents since he believes that he has already fathered seven children. However, the results of the medical test inevitably reveal the shocking truth: he is infertile. The light of medical knowledge causes the disruption of the polygamous household and Baba Segi loses his status as father of all the children. Following the exposure of his infertility, Baba Segi offers to his wives the opportunity to leave. However, except for Bolanle, the first three wives choose to remain, aware of the fact that they would be lost in the “merciless world outside of the household” (Moolla 2017, 93).

Hence, similarly to Adichie, Shoneyin illustrates the restricted social and economic constrictions to which women are subjected. Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi are reduced to the status of house slaves. Their dignity and human rights are annihilated and, as Chielozona Eze observes, “[t]he fact that Baba Segi’s wives accept the conditions spelt out for them by the patriarch, who has been revealed to be impotent and empty, suggests that patriarchy, which is a construct, acts like a bogeyman. Women’s body are controlled by a construct, nullity” (Eze 2015, 322). For Bolanle, living under such conditions is unacceptable and therefore she divorces Baba Segi. This brings to light one significant aspect: she has alternatives. Differently from the first three wives, Bolanle chose to go into marriage without the sort of economic and social restrictions the other women had. In this sense, she stands in sharp contrast to the other three women. She turns her back to the past, understood as tradition, and embraces the future meant as the time in which the individual makes decisions based on the awareness of her rights and dignities. Hence Bolanle becomes a disruptive tool in Shoneyin’s hands, as she interrogates the culture from within and, in doing so, she shakes the assumptions of ascribed identities and rigid cultural norms (Eze 2015, 322; 323).

In the end, like Kambili, Bolanle’s journey is depicted as a triumph because she experiences a metamorphosis and self-actualization that enable her to break free from the oppressive patriarchal strictures (see Nadaswaran 2011). The experience and recognition of unfair treatment sanction her womanist development. She feels like she has “woken up from a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation” (Shoneyin 2010, 244). The act of realization leads Bolanle to no longer accept her subjugated and silenced position. Instead, she is depicted as finally ready to break away from her marital tie in pursuit of the ambitions which epitomize her identity (Nadaswaran 2011, 20):

Don’t think I can’t see the challenges ahead of me. People will say I am a second-hand woman. Men will hurt and ridicule me, but I won’t let them hold me back. I will remain in the land of the living. I am back now and the world is spread before me like an egg cracked open. (Shoneyin 2010, 245)

Conclusions

The Nigerian female *Bildungsroman*, in the process of “feminiz[ing] and postcoloniz[ing]” the *Bildungsroman*, rewrites and transforms the literary genre by calling upon historical and socio-cultural factors (Okuyade 2011, 163). By employing a womanist approach and by advocating the respect for human rights and fundamental freedom, what emerges from these narratives is the way both Adichie and Shoneyin have chosen to represent collective identities in the form of autobiographical writing as a weapon in forming a subjectivity, thus deviating from the European individualistic model. In these terms, *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, rather than suggesting the acceptance of societal values, deviate from such approach by demonstrating instead that only through the renunciation and transcendence of society rigid gender roles, which confine women within the domestic sphere, a woman can

break free and finally assert her personhood. For these reasons, both novels end in a positive note by reflecting a new beginning. As Shalini Nadaswaran observes with regard to the novels of the third generation of Nigerian women writers: “these characters are portrayed as beginning independent, self-determined lives [...]. They are actualized visions of Nigerian women writers – a depiction of courageous, willful and strong womanist” (Nadaswaran 2011, 30).

Notes

¹ Author and poet Alice Walker first used the term ‘womanist’ in her short story, “Coming Apart” in 1979, and later in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).

² By “third generation” we refer to those women writers who were born between the 1960s and 1970s and who acquired recognition in the new millennium.

³ By “religio-graphic” Okuyade implies the restrictions to which Kambili is subjected in religious and spatial terms.

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