

Research Article**ENGENDERING THE BILDUNGSROMAN: ENTRAPMENT AND EMANCIPATION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS AND TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S NERVOUS CONDITIONS*****Etta Julius Ndifon**

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Abstract

The traditional coming-of-age novel, or *Bildungsroman*, explores the growth, development, or education (*Bildung*) of a protagonist who, dissatisfied with the conditions of his native environment, and actuated by his inborn powers of agency, leaves home to pursue his ambition of self-development in the larger world. The genre presupposes that the protagonist is at liberty to choose and decide for himself. Feminist writers have critiqued the coming-of-age narrative as inappropriate for exploring the girl-child experience because, they argue, the patriarchal system does not allow her the power of agency, the power of choosing and deciding her course of life. The patriarchal system imposes gender roles on the girl child that confine her to the domestic circle where she is expected to learn the gentle art of housewifery and to imbibe the values of meekness, submissiveness, sacrifice and long sufferance. Young and radical feminist writers have, however, chosen to write the girl story that explores the female experience of patriarchy; they have introduced defiant and rebellious female protagonists who resist and challenge patriarchal authority and entrapment, thereby redeeming themselves and creating their own individual identities. This paper examines two such narratives by two female African writers, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, as female *Bildungsromane* whose protagonists resist patriarchy's entrapment and aspire to gain personal redemption and self-realisation.

Keywords: Fiction, *Bildungsroman*, patriarchy, agency, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

Bildungsroman is the German expression for novel of education and apprenticeship, or novel of growth and development. Wieland's *Agathon* (1766) is generally considered as the prototype of this novel form, but the most celebrated example of the genre is Johanne Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796), popularized by Carlyle's translation into English in 1824. According to the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Wilhelm, the protagonist of Goethe's novel, "provides the model of the innocent, inexperienced, well-meaning, but often foolish and erring, young man who sets out in life with either no aim in mind or the wrong one. By a series of false starts and mistakes and with help from well-disposed friends, he finally reaches maturity and finds his proper profession" (100).

In his study of the *Bildungsroman*, Thomas L. Jeffers acknowledges the danger of presenting a clear-cut definition of the genre:

"Everyone says that *Wilhelm Meister* is the prototypical *Bildungsroman*, but exactly what type of fiction is that? It is best not to say exactly, as any perusal of precisionist taxonomies will show. A stringent definition will limit the number of bona fide *Bildungsroman* to two or three, a result so frustrating that critics usually drop their arms and let in novels as widely varying ones as Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*" (49).

According to Jeffers, "the term *Bildungsroman* was first coined by Karl Morgentern in lectures in the early 1820s, with specific reference to *Wilhelm Meister*" (49). Jeffers quotes Morgentern as arguing that *Bildungsroman* "portrays the *Bildung* of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness" (49). Jeffers further notes that the term only gained currency after Wilhelm Dilthey had used it in his *Poetry and Experience* (1913). Jeffers further quotes Dilthey as arguing that "the *Bildungsroman* examines a 'legitimate course' of an individual's development, each stage having its own specific value and serving as 'the ground for a higher stage', an upward and onward vision of human growth" (49).

In *Wilhelm Meister and his English Kinsmen*, Susanne Howe further explains the idea of the *Bildungsroman* in the following terms:

The adolescent hero of the typical "apprentice" novel sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and counsellors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment by finding a sphere of action in which he may work effectively. . . . Needless to say, the variations of it are endless" (4).

In his study of the Victorian *Bildungsroman*, Petru Golban notes that "the definitions given to *Bildungsroman* have been many and often confusing, and, as it often happens in the field of literary history and theory . . . the word has become a term of abuse, vague and flexible, and often misleading" (9). He proceeds, however, to point out that the genre is "virtually

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synonymous with autobiographical novel, developmental novel, apprenticeship novel, confessional novel, *Entwicklungsroman* (novel of development), *Erziehungsroman* (novel of education), *Kunstlerroman* (novel of development of a writer or artist)" (9). The central concern of the *Bildungsroman* is the development and progress of a protagonist from youth to maturity, and the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological crises of that protagonist in his or her interaction with the outside world.

Jerome Buckley's influential *Season of Youth* provides a broad outline as well as the features and conventions of a typical *Bildungsroman* plot. According to Buckley, the classic plot of a *Bildungsroman* will show how:

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 quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city (17).

There are bound to be thematic and structural variations of Buckley's outline, but he notes that a typical *Bildungsroman* will incorporate at least two of the principal features of the genre – "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality" (18). The protagonist of the traditional *Bildungsroman* begins his journey to maturity as an outsider who is in conflict with his family, his society, or the world in general. In the course of his growth, he learns to reconcile himself with the society and the people with whom he had hitherto been in conflict. As Jamila McTizic observes, "the hero is reconciled in that he forges his own place in the world, a role that allows him to slip seamlessly into the fabric of society" (22). The classical *Bildungsroman* as established by Goethe therefore lays emphasis, as Gregory Castle argues, on the "aesthetic-spiritual *Bildung*", that is, the aesthetic education and spiritualized inner culture, on the harmony of [the protagonist's intellectual, moral, spiritual, and artistic faculties, or on achieving a dialectical harmony of self and society, of personal desire and social responsibility" (7). Underlying this Goethean paradigm are the concepts of identity and socialization. Identity in this context, as Patricia Alden points out, is "individual selfhood achieved through growth" (1). The *Bildungsroman*, therefore, explores the *Bildungsheld's* (that is, the protagonist's) journey to the realization or reclamation, of identity.

It is important to note that the emphasis on the traditional *Bildungsroman* is on a male protagonist who wilfully leaves the constraints and limitations of home to find self-fulfillment in the outside world. Nadia D. Arendano has noted this emphasis on male protagonists as well as the conservative, bourgeois nature of the traditional *Bildungsroman*:

The classic model . . . generally described the process of growth, development and education

of a single male protagonist from childhood through adolescence, concluding in his entrance into adulthood. . . . The inner life and self-realisation of the protagonist becomes an important element to the development of the whole person. The individual search for a career or vocation may lead the hero to leave home at an early age to make his way independently. . . . After a long journey of soul searching, the protagonist makes a conscious decision to integrate himself into society. His growth culminates with his accommodation to the social order, thus the protagonist acquires bourgeois values" (22).

Feminist critics have argued that the *Bildungsroman*, with its emphasis on the protagonist's ambition, desire, willfulness and self-discovery cannot be an appropriate form for exploring the experiences of women. With particular reference to the nineteenth century female *Bildungsromane*, Avendano argues that: "In spite of the generic intent of the *Bildungsroman* to trace a female protagonist's progression from childhood to adulthood, the novel of development mirrors a reality in which such a development of character is inappropriate for women" (23), and the reason for this, as she argues, is that women's coming-of-age novels were more concerned with propagating in young female readers the social norms and values of submission, suffering, endurance and gentleness as a way of preparing them for marriage: "The female protagonist must uphold the image of the 'eternal feminine' and simultaneously deprive herself of a true *Bildung*. Thus the stages of growth and self-realization that characterize the male *Bildungsroman* are disrupted by the patriarchal system since the social roles for women are antithetical to motivation" (23).

In this regard Mandy Treagus has also argued that:

The conventions regarding heroines in nineteenth-century fiction make many of these elements of plot impossible in the experience of the female protagonists. She cannot just leave her home; in fact, she can hardly go anywhere by herself. If she engaged in a sexual encounter, it could only ever be considered 'debasement'. Such an act would make her a fallen woman with little chance of coming to any kind of satisfactory terms with the world. Fictionally, her fate would rarely be anything but death, thus curtailing the whole *Bildungsroman* narrative. Curtailment is certainly the fate of many fictions of female development. (14)

In the early *Bildungsromane*, female protagonists who demonstrated traits of wilful selfhood, or manifested signs of resistance to, or non-conformity with, patriarchal values, became scapegoats of the society. In the light of such social taboos and restrictions on women, Esther Labovitz has argued that eighteenth and nineteenth-century *Bildungsromane* were typically patriarchal and phallogocentric: "*Bildung* belonged to the male hero" (3), that is, she argues, until society had become enlightened and progressive enough to make conditions favourable for female self-actualisation. Labovitz further emphasizes that: "This new genre was made possible only when *Bildung* became a reality for women, in general, and for the fictional heroine, in particular. When cultural and social

structures appeared to support women's struggle for independence, to go out into the world, engage in careers, in self-discovery and fulfilment, the heroine in fiction began to reflect these changes" (7).

In her appropriately titled thesis, *It's Different for Girls*, McTizic argues that:

Until the mid-twentieth century, women did not readily have the option to experience a coming-of-age in the manner described [by Buckley] It is not that the *Bildungsroman* did not exist for women until they could make the same journey as men, but rather, the feminine *Bildungsroman* differed from its male counterpart because a girl's reality was unlike her brother's reality and, as such, her story would be defined by a different set of standards (1-2).

According to McTizic, the underlying difference in a coming-of-age story between male protagonists and their female counterparts is that the young male hero at the outset has a sense of self and agency, while the female heroine does not:

Whereas male protagonists identify the deficiencies in their lives and then set out on a course to correct those shortcomings, female protagonists have to learn that they have the ability to challenge those limitations before they can take steps to affect change in their own lives. The heroine does not know that this action is possible because she lacks agency (2).

As the hallmark of modern feminine *Bildungsromane*, agency is that psychological, spiritual and intellectual audacity that actuates the girl protagonist to resist the constraints and pressure of an essentially patriarchal society. Barnes defines agency as "the internal powers and capacities which, through their exercise, make the girl an active participant in the events around her" (25). In traditional patriarchal societies, the girl child is not expected to display any sense of agency, of self-assertiveness, self-awareness and personal identity. She is rather expected to conform to the values of submissiveness, self-sacrifice, docility, domesticity, and self-effacement; that is, she is expected to grow up to be what Goethe described as the Eternal Feminine, the Ideal Woman: "She is an ideal, a model of selflessness, and purity of heart. She . . . leads a life of almost pure contemplation, a life without external events – a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story" (in Avandano 42). It is precisely this Goethean image of the ideal woman that feminist authors take upon themselves to challenge and interrogate when they write *Bildungsromane*. Avandano points out that: "This image of a docile, self-sacrificing woman who has no story, exemplifies the image of women as objects. Women's contemporary *Bildungsromane* contrast sharply with Goethe's vision of the Eternal Feminine, because the protagonists indeed have a story to tell of their search for and attainment of a self-constructed identity" (42). The female *Bildungsroman* is therefore subversive. Labovitz argues that it subverts the structure of the traditional male *Bildungsroman* because its emphasis is on the self-development and coming into agency of a female character; and, more importantly, "there would be the birth of and development of the unconventional and rebellious female protagonist. Individual

rebellion would manifest itself in ways ranging from attitudes on marriage, children, careers, and politics that define the lives of these women" (246).

Explaining why the *Bildungsroman* genre has become attractive and popular in modern feminist literature, Avandano points out that:

Because the focus of the *Bildungsroman* is on the relation between individual and environment, it encourages female authors to expose and condemn established patriarchal social norms and values. Moreover, because the genre focuses on repressive societal factors, on the process of disillusionment . . . and on the possibilities for transformation offered by individual choice, it becomes an attractive genre to contemporary female authors who wish to express female development, self-realisation and self-defined identification" (37-38).

As the feminist movement gathered strength and the advocacy for women rights increased, many female authors began to exploit the *Bildungsroman* genre to explore female consciousness and experiences.

This essay will examine Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* as coming-of-age novels that explore female identity and grapple with the values and institution of patriarchy. Both of these novels are coming-of-age narratives with female protagonists, both are concerned with what it means for a young girl to grow up in a society with entrenched patriarchal values. The major focus of these novels is therefore the challenge of the patriarchal institution that imposes restraints and limitations on the adolescent child in general, and the female child in particular. The narrative thrust of both narratives is to show the challenges besetting the female protagonists in their journey to adulthood, the attempts to suppress their self-definition and self-identity, and how these protagonists eventually reclaim their agency and enact subversive and defiant acts against patriarchy, thereby reclaiming their human dignity, their identity and selfhood.

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is about an affluent family whose patriarch is Eugene Achike, a plutocrat, a fanatic Christian, but also a stern, bigoted and post-colonial figure who insists on proper moral, social and religious propriety from every member of his family. A domestic tyrant, he is a wife batterer and child abuser; he does not hesitate to physically punish his wife and children for the slightest perceived indiscretion or infraction. By such peremptory and imperious attitude he has succeeded in intimidating his whole family into passive submission, docility, and unquestioning obedience to his authority. Despite the flagrant wealth and material comfort of his home, his wife Beatrice Achike, and her two children, Kambili the narrator and her elder brother Jaja, all live in perpetual trepidation of Eugene's erratic temperament and authority. In the beginning of the narrative, it is obvious that Eugene's draconian authority over his home has denied his wife and children the power of agency, the freedom to speak up for themselves, to express their feelings and desires, to make decisions and choices of their own. He has denied them

their right as human beings to be recognized as rational agents capable of making their own decisions and determining the course of their own future. This is until the children have had the opportunity of leaving home for holiday to visit their aunt, Ifeoma Achike, a university lecturer with progressive and liberal views. Aunt Ifeoma is a foil to the character of her uncompromising brother, and it is through her mentorship and influence that Jaja and Kambili learn that life can be fun, that their very existence as young human beings can be respected and appreciated, and that their views and feelings matter.

This spatial shift from their home in Enugu to Nsukka at Aunt Ifeoma's house signals the real beginning of the protagonists' journey to selfhood and agency. It is here that both of them become initiated into the world of adulthood. Aunt Ifeoma's house, just as her personality and worldviews, is a sharp contrast to her brother's. A widow with a university career, she has brought up her two children to appreciate the good things of life, she has inculcated in them the values of freedom, free speech, a habit of laughing heartily, the ability to appreciate art, music, and even fashion. It is not surprising that Jaja and Kambili feel awkward beside them, because Eugene Achike has stifled and blighted all the vitality of youth and humanity in them. Kambili the narrator, reflecting on their cousins' air of freedom, notes that: "We always spoke with a purpose back home, especially at the table, but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak" (128).

Amaka, Aunt Ifeoma's daughter of the same age as Kambili, exudes the high-spiritedness and vitality that her mother's upbringing has inculcated in her. She is perceptive enough to notice that her cousins are awkward in social life and incapable of making small talk, she points out to Kambili that she is inaudible and inarticulate when talking: "Why do you lower your voice? . . . You lower your voice when you speak. You talk in whispers." (125) She points out to her mother that something is not exactly right with her cousins: "Are you sure they're not abnormal, mum? . . . Something is not right with them." (150) Jaja and her sister Kambili are also "bewildered that Aunt Ifeoma and her family prayed for, of all things, laughter" (134). After the rosary, Aunt Ifeoma asks if they know any of the songs, and Jaja tells her that they do not sing at home. All this paints a picture of children whose lives have been stifled and truncated by the heavy-handedness and draconian authority of their father. The fact that Jaja and Kambili still want to follow their father's schedules in Aunt Ifeoma's house is an indication of their deep-rooted regimentation. Aunt Ifeoma's house is therefore the needed fertile ground for the rejuvenation of blighted youth. In their short stay here, Jaja and Kambili come in contact with human reality and experience so much that their characters and worldviews are fundamentally transformed. They become emboldened to speak up, to express their feelings and make their own choices. Under the influence of Aunt Ifeoma, Kambili begins to break all the taboos that her father had imposed on her youth, taboos which are spiritual, emotional and social constraints to her growth and self-realisation. Eugene Achike had never given his children the liberty of expressing their emotions, either by speech or by smiling or laughter. Father Amadi is quick to notice that Kambili neither laughs nor smiles. But after going out with Aunt Ifeoma to watch the ritual of the masquerades, Kambili's spirits are so uplifted that she admits that "that night I dreamed that I was laughing." (96) When she keeps silence at Amaka's taunts and rebukes, Aunt Ifeoma reprimands her niece for her diffidence

and timidity: "*O ginidi*, Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back to her!" (177). Kambili is understandably amazed to find her brother speaking freely in the company of other people: "How did Jaja do it? How could he speak so easily? Didn't he have the same bubbles of air in his throat, keeping the words back, letting out only a stutter at best?" (153). When eventually Kambili speaks out, she is as surprised at her own eloquence as Amaka is pleased by it. Kambili also learns from Amaka how to put on cosmetics, a thing proscribed by Eugene Achike's strictly moral and religious asceticism. Her father would also have condemned the idea of his daughter befriending a man, even if that man was Reverend Father Amadi. But here is Kambili enjoying every moment of Father Amadi's kindness and treats. From him Kambili gets the attention and affection she has always yearned from her father. In his company she feels secure, accepted, appreciated and loved: "I felt that I was at home, that I was where I had been meant to be for a long time" (186). She is ecstatic after her first outing with him: "That afternoon played across my mind as I got out of the car in front of the flat. I had smiled, run, laughed. My chest was filled with something like bath foam. Light. The lightness was so sweet I tasted it on my tongue, the sweetness of an overripe bright yellow cashew fruit." (187) Father Amadi also takes Kambili out to make up her hair, which is another instance of her going against her father's training. But for Father Amadi, this is just a way of appreciating Kambili's beauty as a young woman: "It brings out your face" (244), he tells her. We can thus appreciate Kambili's genuine and ingenuous confession of love to Father Amadi, just as we can appreciate Father Amadi's self-discipline when he would not take advantage of a sixteen-years-old girl: "You are almost sixteen, Kambili. You are beautiful. You will find more love than you will need in a lifetime" (280). Kambili's confession of her love for Father Amadi is a demonstration of the new self-identity she has acquired in her aunt's house. The naivety of her confession notwithstanding, she has grown up to a young girl who can take the initiative of expressing her feelings and desires, of defining herself; she has begun to acquire the attribute of feminine agency.

The liberal atmosphere of their aunt's home has had a wholesome influence on Jaja too. He is learning too to speak up, to make his own decisions, and to take responsibility for his decisions and actions. He spends most of his time tending the flowers in Aunt Ifeoma's garden and this closeness to nature has a particularly uplifting impact on his spirits, as Kambili observes: "I had never seen . . . this piercing light in his eyes that appeared when he was in Aunt Ifeoma's garden." (153) When Aunt Ifeoma informs them that their father has called and asked them to stay a few more days at her house, "Jaja smiled so widely I saw dimples I did not even know he had" (155). Kambili is seeing a new Jaja whose hitherto enthralled spirit has been set free to express itself. With their newly acquired power of agency, Jaja and Kambili can now return to their father's house and challenge the omnipotence of patriarchy. Kambili returns from Nsukka with a portrait of their grandfather drawn by her cousin Amaka, while Jaja brings back stalks of purple hibiscus which he plants in his father's compound. Both of these things are symbolic items, tokens of their newly acquired sense of freedom, spiritual and moral strength, and intellectual maturity. Kambili will cling to her grandfather's portrait with all her energy against her father's orders, just as Jaja draws strength and inspiration from the purple hibiscus as they grow: "See, the purple hibiscuses are about to bloom" (257). The blooming of

Jaja's purple hibiscuses signifies a new consciousness that now pervades Eugene Achike's home; a self-consciousness that will threaten to subvert the straitjackets of patriarchal authority.

On arriving back in Enugu, the first thing that Jaja does is to ask for the keys to his room. This is obviously an act of defiance because their father has always kept the keys to his children's rooms. But now Jaja feels grown-up enough to keep his own key because he wants his own privacy: "The key to my room. I would like to have it. *Makana*, because I would like some privacy" (198), he tells his unbelieving father. Kambili on her part is now sickened by the sprawling opulence of her father's house. As her mother welcomes her back, inquiring if Kambili feels different now that she has come back from Nsukka, she muses to herself:

I wanted to tell Mama that it did feel different to be back, that our living room had too much empty space, too much wasted marble floor that gleamed from Sisi's polishing and housed nothing. Our ceilings were too high. Our furniture was lifeless: the glass tables did not shed twisted skin in the harmattan, the leather sofas' greeting was a clammy coldness, the Persian rugs were too lush to have any feeling. But I said, "You polished the etagere (199)".

Having left home for a while, Kambili has had the opportunity to see the world, to compare and contrast human realities, and to acquire an intellectual and philosophical maturity that has now redefined her *weltanschauung*. When she thus expresses disgust at her father's opulent but lifeless house, we can appreciate the dramatic change in her perception when we recall that she had once glorified this same house and identified it with heaven: "When I thought of heaven as a child, I visualized Papa's room, the softness, the creaminess, the endlessness" (49). Her recently developed consciousness has emancipated her from that childhood delusion, so that she now identifies capitalist wealth and its façade of comfort with patriarchal oppression and inhumanity.

Eugene Achike has always despised his own father, Papa-Nnukwu, as a heathen who refused to convert to Christianity, and has accordingly warned his own children not to have anything to do with him. Thus, when he finds the painting of Papa-Nnukwu that Amaka had given to Kambili as a parting gift, he is outraged that his children have brought the portrait of a heathen to his house, and proceeds to tear it to pieces. Kambili desperately clings to the torn pieces of the portrait as if to save her grandfather from destruction:

"Get up!" Papa said again. I still did not move. He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka's music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting . . . The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed

on open skin on my side, my back, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking" (216-217).

Kambili's refusal to stand up from the torn portrait is her first brazen act of defiance against her father. By that act she intends to establish her right as an independent human being whose feelings and desires must be respected. As Davidson has noted, one of the attributes of agency is the agent's willingness to sacrifice her life just to be recognized and respected as an independent human being with her own peculiar desires. Kambili is willing to endure her father's violence and punishment for protecting what is dear to her.

Jaja, too, continues to exercise his new powers of agency by deciding not to attend mass and receive communion on Palm Sunday because, as he explains to his father, "The wafer gives me bad breath . . . And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me" (14). Jaja refuses to buckle before his father, even after Eugene tries to intimidate him with the thought of death for people who refuse to take communion: "It is the body of our Lord . . . You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that." (15) Jaja's response shows a convinced and defiant mind that is made up: "Then I will die . . . Then I will die, Papa" (15). Not only has Jaja refused to attend mass as usual, but he has defied his father's authority and talked back to him, both of them acts that were hitherto unheard of in the household of Eugene Achike. Jaja now conducts himself in a manner befitting one who has come of age, one who knows how to decide for himself. He shuts his door against his father and refuses to come down for dinner even when his father has asked him to: "But Jaja did not come out of his room, and Papa said nothing about it while we ate" (262). He further demonstrates his power of agency when he tells their father that he and Kambili will go to Nsukka to see their aunt; he does not seek his opinion or permission: "We are going to Nsukka, Kambili and I . . . We are going to Nsukka today, not tomorrow. If Kevin will not take us, we will still go. We will walk if we have to" (265).

Henceforth, Eugene Achike must acknowledge and accommodate the individual choices and decisions of his family members. Even his wife Beatrice Achike, known for her sufferance, submissiveness and self-effacement, has also caught on this new spirit of liberty that her children have brought with them from Nsukka. Kambili narrates that:

When Mama asked Sisi to wipe the floor . . . she did not lower her voice to a whisper. She did not hide the tiny smile that drew lines at the edge of her mouth. She did not sneak Jaja's food to his room, wrapped in cloth so it would appear that she simply brought his laundry in. She took him his food on a white tray, with a matching plate. There was something hanging over all of us (261-262).

Beatrice Achike's final enactment of redemptive will is to kill her husband by poisoning his tea. By this singular act, she extirpates tyrannical patriarchy from her life and the lives of her children. Although she publicly proclaims her crime, Jaja takes the responsibility for Eugene Achike's death and goes to prison for the crime that his mother committed, a further testimony of the full maturity of his powers of agency.

Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*

The debut novel of Tsitsi Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* is the story of Sisi Tambudzai, whose dauntless spirit refuses to submit to the constraints that traditional patriarchy imposes on the female sex. The setting of the narrative is the village of Rutivi in then Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. The story begins in the early 1960s and spans to the early 1970s, and is narrated by Sisi Tambudzai, commonly called Sisi Tambu, the protagonist. Sisi Tambu begins school at the official age of seven, but soon after drops out because her parents cannot afford to pay both her school fees and Nhamo's, her elder brother. They would rather manage to send Nhamo to school, not just because he is senior by age to Sisi, but because he is a boy. She is made to understand at a very early age that her femaleness condemns her to a life of domesticity, that aspirations to formal education and intellectual development are not proper in girls. These are the brutal realities that are to profoundly affect her impressionable mind: "I understood that there was not enough money for my fees. Yes, I did understand why I could not go back to school, but I loved going to school, and I was good at it. Therefore, my circumstances affected me badly" (15). Her father Jeremiah thinks she does not have to worry about going to school anyway; he explains to her daughter the domestic roles she is expected to play in life and the needlessness of education to a girl: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (15).

Jeremiah's explanations to his daughter encapsulate the typical patriarchal logic that pigeonholes female children into rigid sex and gender roles; as a girl Sisi is expected to learn from her mother the duties of housewifery, not to distract herself with formal education which is naturally the preserve of male children. But the wilful Sisi cannot find reason in her father's argument. Her mother, to whom she turns for sympathy and help, rather gives her a motherly lecture on the needlessness of female education, pointing out that as a girl she is expected to prepare herself to make sacrifices to the society:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden. . . . How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. . . . And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. *Aiwa!* What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength (16).

Sisi's own idea of womanhood is contrary to what her mother has enunciated in terms of poverty, helplessness, and sacrifice. She has taken as her model of womanhood Maiguru, her uncle's wife, who is educated, rich and comfortable. Drawing inspiration from her, Sisi is resolved that she does not have to bear what her mother has described as the burden of womanhood, that she must go back to school, even if it means paying the fees herself: "I shall go to school again," I announced to my parents. . . . "I will earn the fees", I assured him, laying out my plan for him as I had laid it out in my own

mind. "If you give me some seed, I will clear my own field and grow my own maize. Not much. Just enough for my fees" (17). Although her father is amused ("Such a little shrub, but already making ripe plans!" (17), Sisi's mother convinces her husband to give Sisi the seeds she has requested: "Listen to your child. She is asking for seed. That we can give. Let her try, Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done" (17). So determined is Sisi to forge a self-identity different from her mother's that at eight years of age she starts her own farm in the family fields in order to earn the money to pay her school fees. By her decision and action Sisi has displayed an inborn "ability to act and to be recognized as an actor", which is what Davidson (5) defines as agency. She has refused to succumb to, and be defined by the phallogocentric, patriarchal values that have privileged her brother Nhamo over her, so that Nhamo attends school while she stays at home to learn to be a good wife. A child as determined and self-willed as Sisi cannot hope to take her mother as a model, or to get inspiration from her. This is because her mother is an excellent example of the ideal woman of the patriarchal society; she has been so thoroughly socialized to accept as immutable and inevitable the values of self-resignation, self-abnegation, submissiveness and long sufferance that the only advice she can give her daughter is to learn to accommodate herself to those same patriarchal values that have subjugated her all her life:

I think my mother admired my tenacity and also felt sorry for me because of it. She began to prepare me for disappointment long before I would have been forced to face up to it. To prepare me she began to discourage me. "And do you think you are so different, so much better than the rest of us? Accept your lot and enjoy what you can of it. There is nothing else to be done." I wanted support, I wanted encouragement; warnings if necessary, but constructive ones. On the day that she discouraged me once too often I decided she had been listening too devoutly to my father (20).

Sisi's elder brother whom she thought could give her the much needed encouragement and support, is already too socialized into patriarchal attitudes. He is so taken in by the superiority that attends his maleness that he cannot understand his sister's yearning for education: "Why do you bother? . . . Don't you know I am the one who has to go to school?" (20) When Sisi asks him why she should not go to school too, Nhamo is blunt: "It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl . . . That's what Baba said, remember?" (21) It is this sense of privileged maleness that Sisi resents in her brother, his lack of sympathy for her sister's predicament. So when he later steals the maize from Sisi's farm to give it to the girls, Sisi believes it is in order to further sabotage her efforts at self-education. The fury with which she fights him is just another instance of her resistance to the forces that would obstruct the fulfilment of her aspirations.

Sisi takes another step towards her self-development when, on the advice of Mr. Matimba the school teacher, she decides to travel to town with him to sell her ripe maize to the whites. Her father's initial rejection of this idea is another attempt by patriarchy to frustrate and thwart the fulfilment of her educational dreams: "Ma'Shingayi . . . tell this child of yours she cannot go to town with that man" (25). Once again, her mother prevails upon her father to let Sisi go to town and sell

her maize, if only (as she reasons) to see for herself that she cannot succeed: "The girl must have a chance to do something for herself, to fail for herself. . . . She must see these things for herself" (25). This journey to town with Mr. Matimba in the school truck is significant in several ways: it is a "voyage" of discovery of sorts, because Sisi gets to see new sights in town, and more important is the fact that an old white woman takes pity of her situation and gives Mr. Matimba ten pounds on behalf of her education. Jeremiah's claim that the money should belong to him because Sisi is her daughter is typical of patriarchal logic which reduces the girl child to a father's object and property: "Then you have taken my money', my father told the headmaster. 'That money belongs to me. Tambudzai is my daughter, is she not? So isn't it my money?' "(30).

Sisi resents the patriarchal privileging of Nhamo over her in most matters in the family, not only in education. An instance of this male privileging is when Nhamo is asked to accompany their father to the airport to receive their uncle Babamukuru and his family who are returning from overseas. Although Sisi would have loved to have the experience and excitement of the journey, her father tells her that it is just natural for her, being a girl, to stay at home and prepare for their homecoming; he advises her to curb her "unnatural inclinations" (34), her disposition to yearn for things and activities beyond the domestic sphere. Sisi narrates that: "My father's idea of what was natural had begun to irritate me a long time ago, at the time that I had to leave school" (34).

Sisi soon comes to the realization that even her educated and supposedly enlightened uncle Babamukuru is no less sexually biased when he decides that Nhamo should go and stay with him at the mission where he is the headmaster. The excited Nhamo further fuels Sisi's resentment with his phallogocentric justification of Babamukuru's choice: "And you had better stop being jealous. Why are you jealous anyway? . . . Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? . . . With me it's different. I was meant to be educated" (49). Sisi thus feels entrapped in a system of traditional and social values that endorses differential treatment of children on the basis of their sex, and her psychological reaction to that system is resentment, irritation and anger: "I understood that Nhamo was older than I and much more advanced academically. I understood that that made him the logical choice for Babamukuru's project. If he had not insisted that that there were other criteria that disqualified me at the outset, I might have been happy for him. But he did insist and I was very angry indeed" (50).

Jeremiah's lack of enthusiasm for her daughter's education, his sexist biases against her, his inclination to consign her to a purely domestic circle, as well as Babamukuru's choice of Nhamo over her, and her mother Ma'Shingayi's tendency to indoctrinate her on the inevitable burden of womanhood, these are matters that tend to thwart the aspirations of Sisi, to stultify the growth and development of an otherwise energetic and intelligent girl. And because Sisi sees Nhamo as complicit with the regressive and suppressive system, she has no regrets when he eventually dies. As one of the pillars of the patriarchal system, Nhamo constitutes a physical and symbolic barrier to Sisi's growth; his death accordingly paves the way for her sister's further development. This is because Babamukuru, regretting that "there is no male child to take this duty, to take the job of raising the family from hunger and need" (56),

reluctantly decides to take Sisi to stay with him to continue her education at the mission. Partly by her own self-determination, and partly by a *deus ex machina*, Sisi has got the opportunity to fulfil her ambition of being educated, and thus improving herself and her circumstances; she feels that at last she is leaving the limitations and constraints of the patriarchal system of her family and village to an environment that will offer her opportunities of self-development and growth.

For Sisi the journey from her village to the mission marks the beginning of her own personal journey to self-discovery, self-fulfillment, and self-emancipation:

How can I describe the sensations that swamped me when Babamukuru started his car, with me in the front seat beside him, on the day I left my home? . . . What I experienced that day was a short cut, a rerouting of everything I had ever defined as me into fast lanes that would speedily lead me to my destination. My horizons were saturated with me, my leaving, my going As for my sisters, well, they were there. They were watching me climb into Babamukuru's car to be whisked away to limitless horizons. It was up to them to learn the important lesson that circumstances were not immutable, no burden so binding that it could not be dropped" (58).

Sisi hopes that she is leaving behind her peasant background (with its repressive patriarchal trappings) to find "another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead" (58); she hopes that at her new home she will have the opportunity to develop intellectually and spiritually, "to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, the creation of consciousness, rather than mere sustenance of the body" (59). At Babamukuru's house, Sisi's self-development begins with her learning such modern habits as using a knife and fork at table and also using electrical appliances. She also avails herself of her cousin Nyasha's extensive library by reading omnivorously. She excels at school and is elected class monitor. Now fourteen years old, Sisi begins to think of her stay at Umtali mission as a period of redemption and reincarnation:

Thus began the period of my reincarnation. I liked to think of my transfer to the mission as my reincarnation. . . . I expected this era to be significantly profound and broadening in terms of adding wisdom to my nature, clarity to my vision, glamour to my person. . . . Freed from the constraints of the necessary and the squalid that defined and delimited our activity at home, I invested a lot of robust energy in approximating to my idea of a young woman of the world. . . . It was good to be validated in this way (94).

The rude awakening comes when Sisi learns soon after that Babamukuru's home, with all its education and enlightenment, is no less patriarchal and oppressive than her uneducated family in Rutivi. Sisi had thought that poverty and illiteracy were the blight of female self-development in her village, but here is Babamukuru, rich and educated, imposing his patriarchal authority on his daughter Nyasha and his wife Maiguru, all of whom had been with him overseas and are

supposedly exposed to civilized and modern ways. Babamukuru expects Nyasha to be the ideal daughter that lives in accordance with social and moral decorum and decency, just as he expects his wife Maiguru to be the ideal woman, catering to his whims and caprices with limited or no sense of self and agency. He insists on regulating Nyasha's reading and social tastes: he rebukes her for reading D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, which he considers too sexually suggestive; he prohibits her from keeping male friends and seeks to control her mode of dressing. But Nyasha is by nature and exposure high-spirited and irrepressible; endowed with a native sense of self and agency, she is constantly defiant of her father's authority and control, the result of which is endless scenes of confrontation and conflict with her father.

When the students organize a Christmas party at Beit Hall, Nyasha is excited because "she loved to 'rave' and did not often get the chance" (111). On that night her father disapproves of her dressing because, according to him, it compromised her decency. At the end of the party Nyasha returns late to the house, escorted by her male friend Andy. As her father accuses her of immorality, she attempts to explain her innocence: "Nyasha did not cave in completely, which was unwise of her. 'I was only talking. And dancing,' she explained. 'He was teaching me a new dance'" (115). Calling her a whore, Babamukuru strikes Nyasha repeatedly, and the unrepentant girl fights him back as she insists she did nothing wrong. The fight is a clash between parental authority and adolescent self-expression: "Babamukuru insisted he would kill Nyasha and then hang himself. 'She has dared. . . to raise her fist against me. She has dared to challenge me. Me! Her father. I am telling you . . . today she will not live. We cannot have two men in this house. Not even Chido, you hear that Nyasha? Not even your brother there dares to challenge my authority'" (117).

By talking back to her father and fighting back when he strikes her, Nyasha is trying to assert her independence and individual identity; she is exercising her power of agency against a repressive patriarchal authority which brooks no challenge or contradiction. To further demonstrate her independence and control over her life and body, Nyasha refuses to eat the food served her. Her father takes this as another challenge to his authority and insists that she must eat her food. Nyasha then adopts the strategy of *bulimia nervosa*, which entails gorging her food and then disgorging it soon after as a mark of her protest.

Nyasha's predicament constitutes another lesson for Sisi Tambu, who thus learns that patriarchal repression is a universal blight on female development. Reflecting on her own experiences back in the village, she identifies with her cousin's travails after her fight with her father:

I followed her to the servants' quarters, where we sat, she smoking a cigarette held between shaking fingers and I feeling bad for her and thinking how dreadfully familiar that scene had been, with Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I had felt victimized at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any

of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it. And that was the problem. You had to admit that Nyasha had no tact. You had to admit she was altogether too volatile and strong-willed. . . . But what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (118).

Sisi realizes to her chagrin that patriarchal authority is a fundamental and universal constraint on the self-realisation and identity-formation for girls, that patriarchal expectations of female docility and submissiveness are a major hindrance to the girl's attainment of personal power and independence. Nyasha's assertiveness and self-indulgence, like Sisi's "unnatural" yearning for education, translate to what Sisi describes as questions of "self versus surrender" (121).

If Nyasha has elected self over surrender, her mother Maiguru has chosen surrender and subsumed her self-identity under her husband's authority. Sisi is disappointed to learn that this woman who holds a Master's degree and whom she holds as a model of the redeemed woman, is actually like her own uneducated mother-- an ideal woman whose essential values are sacrifice, submissiveness, self-effacement, and self-deprivation. She has surrendered her monthly salary to her husband who manages it as he wills, and she confesses to Sisi that she has had to make tremendous sacrifices for the sake of her family: "What it is . . . to have to choose between self and security. When I was in England I glimpsed for a little while the things I could have been, the things I could have done if -- if -- if things were -- different. . . . And does anyone realize, does anyone appreciate, what sacrifices were made?" (103)

Sisi too has begun to feel the enervating impact of Babamukuru's repressive authority on her sense of self; "At first I was disappointed when I came to the mission. . . . We hardly ever laughed when Babamukuru was within earshot, because, Maiguru said, his nerves were bad. His nerves were bad because he was so busy. For the same reason we did not talk much when he was around either" (104). This gloomy and circumspect atmosphere must account for the fact that Sisi has grown somewhat diffident and self-conscious in the mission, in contrast to her ebullient self-assertiveness in the village:

I was always aware of my surroundings. When the surroundings were new and unfamiliar, the awareness was painful and made me behave very strangely. At times like that I wanted so badly to disappear that for practical purposes I ceased to exist. . . . I do not know how I came to be like that. If you remember, when I was at home before I came to the mission, I could assert myself and tell people what was on my mind. So I suppose that in spite of my success and settling down well, my going to the mission was such a drastic change that it unnerved me (112).

The fact is that Sisi, overwhelmed by her uncle's beneficence, has taken refuge in "the image of the grateful poor female relative" (118) to the extent that she has abandoned "the intensity and determination with which I had lived my early years" (118). Even though she disapproves of the belated wedding that Babamukuru is arranging for her parents, Sisi

lacks the courage to express her mind, to tell her uncle that the wedding ceremony, in her mind, would be ridiculous after so many years of her parents' cohabitation:

There was definitely something wrong with me, otherwise I would have had something to say for myself. . . . Coming to the mission, continuing my education and doing well at it, these had been the things that mattered. . . . My vagueness and reverence for my uncle, what he was, what he had achieved, what he represented and therefore what he wanted, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position. It had happened insidiously (166-167).

There is an obvious situational irony in the fact that the expectations that Sisi had entertained of further developing her powers (of speech and freedom) are rather frustrated by the repressive authority of her benefactor; she has lost her assertive voice and self-confidence in the house where she had hoped to develop these attributes the most. Her power of agency, of choosing and deciding for herself, is accordingly curtailed. It is only by gradual degrees that she is able to reassert her sense of self and agency. First she adopts the escapist strategy of feigning illness to avoid attending her parents' wedding, and then, confronted by her uncle's threats, she finally speaks her mind to him, explaining that she does not want to attend the wedding. She stands her ground despite her uncle's threat to stop buying her clothes, to stop her school fees, and to send her home. She willingly receives fifteen lashes of the cane (fifteen because she has just turned fifteen years of age) and two weeks of doing home chores as punishment: "To me that punishment was the price of my newly acquired identity" (171). Only by reclaiming her power to speak up to authority and articulating her own views, by defying impositions that negate her own sense of self, and by accepting to suffer for her own choices, only then has Sisi been able to establish her female identity and independence. Thereafter, Babamukuru will give careful consideration to her feelings and opinions before taking decisions on her behalf. Thus when she wins a scholarship to attend the prestigious Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, Babamukuru at first hesitates, arguing that she should continue schooling at the mission so that she will be able to earn some money and thereafter be in "a position to be married by a devout man and set up a decent home" (183). But sensing Sisi's excitement about going to the convent, and having learnt to accommodate her feeling, he asks her opinion. As far as Sisi is concerned, this is an opportunity to "take another step upwards in the direction of my freedom" (186).

Conclusion

This essay has examined two coming-of-age novels by two female African writers, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Tsitsi Dangaremba, respectively from Nigeria and Zimbabwe. The novels, *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie and *Nervous Conditions* by Dangaremba, are both debut products of these young writers. Both novels are concerned with the traumatic experiences of young girls growing up in patriarchal societies which deny them the power of agency, the right to make their own individual choices, the right to make decisions for themselves, and thus the right to forge their own self-identity.

This is so because the father figure or patriarch assumes the status of an enlightened despot or domestic tyrant, and arrogates to himself the power to make decisions on behalf of his wife and children without due regard for their personal feelings or their aspirations and inclinations.

In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the wealthy patriarch has succeeded in bullying his wife and children into timid submissiveness. In Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* Tambudzai's passion for formal education and her aspiration to rise above the drabness and squalor of village life are frustrated by her parents' inability to pay her school fees; but her predicament is further aggravated by the entrenched patriarchal values of her society: her father believes that the right to education belongs, not to a female child, but to his son Nhamo. Her mother expects her to abandon her "misguided" inclinations and aspirations and to reconcile herself to what she calls the realities of womanhood, self-sacrifice, long-sufferance and unquestioning submissiveness. In both novels the patriarch and the phallogocentric values he embodies deny the adolescent child, especially the girl child, the right to self-identity. Not until these child-protagonists learn to defy and revolt against their patriarch's repressive authority and claim their power of agency do they begin to get recognized and acknowledged as individual human beings, and only then do they establish their self-identity.

The traditional *bildungsroman* presupposes that the young protagonist has an inborn sense of agency, and therefore can move out and explore the world; modern writers of the genre like Adichie and Dangaremba have exploited this narrative form to expose the difficulties and trauma of a girl child growing up in the stultifying and asphyxiating environment of a patriarchal society. Both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Nervous Conditions* interrogate the efficacy of the traditional *bildungsroman* for the girl child growing up in a society with hidebound patriarchal values. The novels also point out that the only way for a girl child to achieve self-identity and self-fulfillment is to revolt against repressive and moribund authority. By thus introducing defiant and rebellious female protagonists who must fight to reclaim their power of agency and thereby emancipate themselves from the entrapments of patriarchy, these novels have had to en-gender the *bildungsroman* genre.

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