

Africanising Bildungsroman: A re-reading of Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path* (2012)

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Abstract

The Bildungsroman, or novel of formation, has remained one of the most influential yet contested genres in literary criticism since its emergence in eighteenth-century Germany. For more than two centuries, scholars have debated the extent to which the genre can be applied beyond its European origins, with traditionalists arguing for preserving its classical German model and revisionist critics advocating a broader, more inclusive understanding of developmental narratives. This study contributes to this debate by examining Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path* as an African Bildungsroman. The article argues that although the novel departs from certain conventions associated with the classical European tradition, it embodies the genre's fundamental characteristics through its representation of personal growth, moral education, identity formation, and the protagonist's negotiation of social realities. Drawing on Bloom's theory of literary influence and intertextual inheritance, as well as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's metaphor of world literature as a "global flower garden," the study demonstrates that literary genres are dynamic and continually transformed through cross-cultural adaptation and creative reinterpretation. The analysis reveals that *The Narrow Path* appropriates and reconfigures the Bildungsroman form to reflect African historical, cultural, and social experiences while maintaining its core developmental structure. By situating Selormey's novel within the Bildungsroman tradition, the article challenges Eurocentric restrictions on genre classification and argues for a more inclusive critical framework that recognises the contributions of African narratives to the evolution of world literature. Ultimately, the study contends that expanding the boundaries of the Bildungsroman enriches both genre theory and comparative literary scholarship by acknowledging the plurality of developmental experiences across cultures.



Keywords

Bildungsroman, *The Narrow Path*, African literature, Bloom's Theory of Influence, Ngugi's 'A World Flower Garden.

Introduction

The Bildungsroman, commonly translated as the “novel of formation” or “novel of development,” has held a central place in literary studies since its emergence in eighteenth-century Germany. Traditionally associated with the intellectual, moral, psychological, and social development of a youthful protagonist, the genre has long been regarded as one of the most influential narrative forms in world literature. However, over the past two centuries, critical debate has intensified over the scope, boundaries, and cultural applicability of the Bildungsroman, particularly regarding whether African and other non-European coming-of-age narratives can legitimately be accommodated within the genre.

At the centre of this debate are two competing critical positions. The first, represented by scholars such as Goethe (1775), Wieland (1766–1767), and later Hardin (1991), adopts a relatively conservative or “purist” perspective. These scholars argue that the Bildungsroman is a historically and culturally specific European literary form, whose defining characteristics emerged from the particular social, philosophical, and historical conditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. According to this view, extending the genre beyond its original context risks diluting its distinctive aesthetic and ideological foundations. Consequently, the traditional Bildungsroman canon has largely remained confined to a select group of European texts that conform to established developmental patterns of individual maturation, social integration, and personal fulfilment.

In contrast, a second group of critics advocates a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of the genre. Scholars such as Gohlman (1990), Redfield (1996), and Eko (2006) argue that the Bildungsroman should not be confined to its European origins but rather understood as a flexible narrative framework capable of accommodating diverse cultural experiences of growth, identity formation, and social negotiation. These scholars contend that literary traditions worldwide have produced narratives that embody many of the central concerns of the Bildungsroman, including self-discovery, psychological development, moral education, and the search for social belonging. From this perspective, African novels that portray the

developmental journeys of young protagonists merit critical consideration within the broader Bildungsroman tradition.

Despite growing recognition of global and postcolonial variations of the genre, African novels remain marginal within mainstream Bildungsroman scholarship. Existing studies have predominantly focused on European and North American texts, thereby reinforcing what Redfield (1996) describes as the privileged status of a small number of canonical German and Western novels in defining the genre. As a result, African narratives of growth and development have frequently been excluded from critical discussions or dismissed as juvenile fiction because of their focus on childhood, adolescence, and the coming-of-age process. Such assumptions have contributed to a significant gap in scholarship on how African writers adapt, transform, and indigenize the conventions of the Bildungsroman to reflect local histories, cultures, and social realities.

This marginalisation raises important theoretical and critical questions. If the Bildungsroman is fundamentally concerned with human growth and the formation of identity, should its applicability be limited by geography and cultural origin? To what extent can African narratives of development be understood as alternative manifestations of the genre? More importantly, how do African writers negotiate the conventions of the traditional Bildungsroman while responding to the distinct socio-cultural experiences of African societies?

Within this context, this study examines Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path* as an African Bildungsroman. The study argues that although Selormey's novel departs from certain conventions of the classical European model, it nevertheless embodies the essential developmental trajectory that characterises the genre. Through its depiction of youthful growth, self-discovery, moral education, social struggle, and identity formation, the novel demonstrates how the Bildungsroman can be reimagined within an African cultural and historical context.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What critical perspectives within Bildungsroman scholarship have contributed to the exclusion or marginalisation of African novels from the genre?

2. How does Selormey employ narrative structure, characterisation, thematic development, and stylistic innovation in *The Narrow Path* to adapt and reconfigure the conventions of the Bildungsroman?

Addressing these questions is particularly important because the continued privileging of European models has widened the gap in scholarship on African developmental narratives. While numerous studies have examined the formal and thematic characteristics of the classical Bildungsroman, relatively few have explored how African writers appropriate and transform the genre to articulate indigenous experiences of growth, identity, and social belonging. This study therefore seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to decolonise genre studies by demonstrating that African novels are not merely peripheral imitations of European forms but creative reworkings that expand the possibilities and boundaries of the Bildungsroman.

The article reviews existing scholarship on the Bildungsroman, with particular attention to debates over its definition, characteristics, and cultural limitations. This review establishes the theoretical framework for examining the relationship between African fiction and the genre. The discussion then analyses the narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and stylistic features of *The Narrow Path* to demonstrate how Selormey adapts the Bildungsroman tradition to an African setting. Ultimately, the study argues for a broader, more inclusive conception of the Bildungsroman, one that recognises the legitimacy of African developmental narratives and acknowledges their contribution to the genre's ongoing evolution.

The Debates on the Bildungsroman

Debates over whether certain African novels qualify as Bildungsromane continue to arise, and they are consistently skewed against Africa's advantage. The term has its etymology in German, and the genre is traditionally centred on the male child's physical and psychological development. A typical Bildungsroman plot follows a 'young boy' who, after a deep sense of emotional loss, embarks on a (long) journey, either physical or metaphorical, to seek answers. The 'journey' opens his eyes through inevitable mistakes that culminate in the eventual achievement of self-identity.

The pioneering role of Wieland's (1766-1767) *History of Agathon* is often overlooked when the Bildungsroman is discussed. This may be because Wieland kept his story at a philosophical and theoretical level, thereby making it 'reader-unfriendly' for most people at the time. Between

1795 and 1796, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) brought the genre to a wider audience and, therefore, set it on the path to general recognition, acceptance, and popularity. Bildungsroman literally means a 'novel of formation/education', as Bildung means 'formation' or 'education' and Roman means 'novel'.

Owing to its foreign background, the genre uses its traditional German definition to exclude African novels from this distinctive genre. In his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams (1999) writes that the Bildungsroman shows:

... the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences – and often through a spiritual crisis – into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world (p.193).

Despite Abrams's effort to provide a general definition to guide novelists and scholars, he received serious objections from other critics. Buckley (1974), noticing the problem of 'non-inclusion' of African novelists, attempts to explain what he considers the 'standard elements' of a Bildungsroman to clear the conflicts surrounding the genre. However, this also caused serious confusion among novelists whose works were deemed unfit. Hardin (1991) also cites Wulf Koepke's explanation that the word Bildung defies English translation, which might be another reason for the genre's limited access. The above 'ding-dong' battle did not bring about a harmonious clarification of the term; it rather added to the confusion. The typical questions that one may ask as a result of the above-mentioned confusion are whether Bildungsroman should be determined based on the novels that fit the style of Goethe's popular *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* or should Wieland's *History of Agathon* be used as the prototype? Or should one look for the very few post-war German novels to use as a 'measuring rod' to find what makes a 'perfect' Bildungsroman?

Many critics, such as Redfield (1996) and Steinecke (1991), repudiated the attempt by a few Germans to discourage non-European (African) Bildungsroman enthusiasts from telling their stories within the genre's framework. Redfield (1996), for instance, condemned the attempt by 'five or six German-language novels that, in post-German studies, have constantly been used as the genre's main representatives' (p.41) to effectively block other novels, especially African, from being part of the genre.

As the debates intensified, a third group of critics, clearly fed up with the attention given to the 'over-rated' Bildungsroman genre and perhaps wishing the whole genre

and its furore could be boycotted, questioned its relevance in 20th- and 21st-century literature and criticism. Steinecke (1991), a member of this third group, observes that the Bildungsroman is a phantom genre. He explains that German scholars in the 1960s expressed doubt about the existence of a true Bildungsroman genre and asked ‘... how much insight it provides into the literary-historical context of that genre’ (p.70). Sengle (1815-1848), cited in Steinecke (1991), describes the genre as ‘literary-historical mythology’ (p.906). These critics questioned how ‘effective and descriptive’ the term was and wondered whether the parameters of definition should indeed be widened, and, if so, to what extent? Gohlman (1990), adding her voice to the argument, captures her response succinctly when she explains that:

It is the nature of a Bildungsroman to become ‘dated’ because it is based on the idea that nothing in the external world remains constant. The particular Bildungsprozess that was right for Wilhelm (Meister) would not and could not be right for the individual growing up twenty, fifty or a hundred years later. The hero of the Bildungsroman is always representative. (p.20)

Gohlman holds the view that one should not allow oneself to become stuck in history. One should move with the times, and the genre should expand to include African novels with child protagonists who need not necessarily ‘walk in the shadow’ of the genre as defined two centuries ago. The purists must understand that, just like the English language, the genre will evolve and adapt to cultural and traditional usage beyond its original setting.

Ngugi’s Metaphor of a ‘flower garden’

Given the above debate between the purists and other critics, there is a need to enrich the discourse by examining the theory espoused by Ngugi (1993) of ‘a world flower garden’ (p.12). Ngugi argues that it serves no useful purpose to continue to maintain Europe and the West as the centre of literary creativity and criticism. According to him, a metaphorical ‘decentralisation’ of literary works, in favour of ownership by individual nations of the world, will guarantee a blend and variety of flowers, and this will lead to the enrichment of the world’s literature. If the African novelist is to be ‘forced’ to write strictly within the parameters of the genre, it will, apart from spelling attrition to both sides, be an impossibility, as the linguistic and stylistic limitations of ‘old’ German do not operate anywhere in the world, not even, to a large extent, in German herself. There can never be such a thing as, as Gohlman puts it, ‘absolute social and moral values’ (p.11)

that would be seen as a universal formula for the child protagonists’ development, because there should always be a difference between classical and contemporary protagonists.

The present paper aligns with the school of thought that holds that the boundaries of the definition of literary concepts and the practice of the Bildungsroman must be expanded to include, among others, novels by African writers that focus on the growth and experiences of youth.

Harold Bloom’s Theory of Influence

Turning to the debate, one can readily draw on Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997) to further strengthen the position of the African novelist. Bloom’s relational comparison between writers and their predecessors foregrounds the fact that great poets/writers are always imitated/copied by modern writers in what he refers to as ‘the agonistic misprision performed upon powerful forerunners by only the most gifted of their successors’ (p.xxiv). His poetics serve as a guide for successors of these ‘great writers’ to deliberately revise old models, and they should be competent in their chosen fields to hone their skills.

Bloom discusses the superiority of the ‘great writers’ on the literary scene and compares them to post-Enlightenment writers. He employs the metaphor of ‘Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads in a battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites’ (p.11) to explain the relationship. He argues that modern writers always strive, in anxiety, to carve a unique identity for themselves. To create work from an old subject, there is always the temptation to fall into the trap of copying or imitating the earlier work, and the predecessor’s huge influence intimidates the modern writer. Bloom’s poetics sees the anxiety of influence as an encouragement that spurs ‘post-Enlightenment writers’ to carve a niche for themselves. Oscar Wilde’s views, as stated by Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, differ on the subject of influence, as he associates it with the violation of moral laws. He believes that when one is influenced, one ceases to have a mind of one’s own; one becomes lazy, and everything about one is borrowed, even ‘sin’. ‘He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him’ (p.6).

I disagree with Wilde’s condemnation of ‘influence’, as his explanation is one-sided and appears to equate ‘influence’ with wholesale copying. There would be no new, successful influence at work in today’s writing and learning generations. Clear examples can be cited between Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and Fiwwoo’s *The Fifth*

Landing Stage, and between Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*.

Bildungsroman, then, from Bloom's perspective, can be seen as an unavoidable influence of great writers that draws out the best creativity in the modern writer, helping them shine in their endeavours, while remaining mindful of the seasons, traditions, and cultural milieu of each writer. It is possible, then, to have, through mere juxtaposition and/or intertextuality, trends and stylistic choices of writers serving as resemblances or parallels echoed in the modern writers' works. Thus, the need to reiterate that influence would always be there in latent writers who decide to adopt and adapt the creativity of their predecessors. It is left to the modern writer to use the influence as a means of reaching his goal by tailoring his work to his traditional values, times, specific events, and many other choices.

T. S. Eliot's View in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'

Bloom's theory is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's views in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1932). Eliot defends the importance of tradition and forcefully foregrounds the significance of older writers to modern writers. He argues that although Homer and Dante wrote in different centuries of literary history, they were his contemporaries through their work, which informed his own. He rejects the impression that the true greatness and individuality of a poet (writer) can be assessed by what they have departed from their predecessors. He avers that 'the most individual parts of his (the poet's) work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously' (p.42). He, like Bloom, cautions that tradition does not mean doing away with one's novelty to imitate the work of one's predecessors. To him, the poetic process demands novelty, which requires one to tap into tradition and then assert one's originality.

Eliot's idea of tradition offers an opportunity to study imitation in literary studies and suggests that Selormey's *The Narrow Path* can be studied in relation to the Bildungsroman.

Eliot's, Bloom's and Ngugi's theories furnish this paper with a strong response to the purists and provide the framework that will help situate Selormey's *The Narrow Path* within the context and universe of the Bildungsroman genre, and to draw elements that make it possible to expand the boundaries of the genre to include African novels with a focus on child narrative experiences.

Bildungsroman, the Template

The Bildungsroman genre has, at its core, a protagonist's sojourn from innocence/childhood to adulthood or emotional maturity. Buckley (1974) outlines the structural constituents of what he considers the pattern of a universal Bildungsroman:

A child of some sensibility grows up in a country or provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon his free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile... His first schooling... may be frustrating... He, therefore, sometimes at quite an early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and the relative innocence) to make his way independently to the city. There his real 'education' begins ... his direct experience of urban life ... at least two love affairs or sexual encounters ... he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity. His initiation complete, he may visit his old home to demonstrate, by his presence, the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice (pp.17-18).

The formulaic structure of Buckley's 'Bildungsroman' is accused of being gender-blind, and Rosowski and Hirsch's (1983) paper criticises this. Apart from the bias and its clear exclusion of women, Buckley's formula also offers a 'cast-in-concrete' format that a (would-be) successful novelist should follow to achieve a Bildungsroman 'fit'. Among the items in the pattern, Buckley proffers that a writer should have an 'intelligent' protagonist who must leave home due to domestic conflicts and should encounter crises and romance as part of his growth. He should eventually find a use for his newly acquired skills in the most suitable place.

Many uniquely produced child-focused novels have achieved and continue to attract great success in the Bildungsroman genre without following Buckley's pattern. Adichie's (2004) *Purple Hibiscus*, for instance, focuses on the feminine protagonist, making it a clear deviation from both the traditional German structure and Buckley's template. Despite criticism of Buckley's formula, some elements remain relevant to the discussion in this paper.

Selormey's *The Narrow Path* fits so well into the Bildungsroman, and the discussion below proves it.

Bildungsroman and the Narrow Path

Selormey's *The Narrow Path* (1966) is set in colonial Ghana and, to a large extent, mirrors the author's life. Selormey guides the reader through the gradual growth and development of the protagonist, Kofi, as he begins and

attends several Catholic schools because his strict father (teacher/headmaster) is, now and then, transferred by the 'Mission Authority' to revamp sinking schools. *The Narrow Path* is the story of a young boy's struggle between traditional values and modern education, and of his parents' desire to maintain strict discipline to ensure the child's future success. It bears the hallmarks of a 'coming-of-age' story, following a young boy as he takes the reader through the tensions between traditional life and the 'new breeze of air' in the colonial period. The strict focus of this paper is to discuss the unique features (narrative, structure, characterisation, stylistics, etc.) that Selormey adopts to adapt the genre while ensuring that he maintains a story brewed in an African pot with its unique socio-cultural flavour.

To make a definite claim that Selormey's *The Narrow Path* fits into the Bildungsroman, it is necessary to set parameters and discuss the genre's makeup, which is the focus of this paper. The first point is that the protagonist realises that the home environment is not conducive. This results from the pervasive conflicts he has to endure. The second factor is that he later meets people who positively impact his life, and through them, he becomes aware of his character and feelings; this leads to a critical comparison (or introspection) that affirms his realisation of the constraining conditions at home. The third point is that the protagonist begins to reassess his new 'self' but intuitively recognises the need for patience. However, he is convinced that his near-maturity – his newly found self – will not be compromised. The penultimate point is that the protagonist becomes aware of his full-fledged maturity – psychologically, physically, and emotionally – and takes steps to assume responsibility for his actions. The final point is that he is certain he is the future (pillar) of his family. This structure, it must be stated, is a familiar pattern in most plots of literary creations and is followed by many writers. A typical example of a novel patterned along the above structure is Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). But because of the illusory attitude to the definition of Bildungsroman and its status, as Redfield (1996) suggests, as a phantom genre, the above model cannot be described as universal. The whole idea behind the genre is that a young protagonist (a boy) should be the focus of a narrative. His growth and development must culminate in experiences that foster maturity as he progresses from childhood to 'adulthood'. There is eventual full growth and maturity as he takes his place of responsibility among his people.

Selormey's *The Narrow Path* has a linear plot that structures the story to predate the birth of Kofi, the protagonist. In doing so, Selormey employs a surrogate adult voice (mature Kofi) to serve the reader a retrospective prologue in Chapter

One. Using this unique narrative feature, Selormey blends the first and third persons (points of view) to give a lucid exposition of a family whose head, Nani, is so uncompromising that his home becomes suffocating under unorthodox methods of 'punishment'. The peculiar use of the two points of view in Chapter One of the novel is worthy of mention. This is because it is smoothly woven into a genre that traditionally casts its story in an autobiographic mode and, therefore, makes first person readily available as a narrative choice.

As Selormey shifts between the two points of view in *The Narrow Path*, he concludes the first chapter with a suspenseful assurance, 'And so, in love and trust, I thrived' (p.28). This, obviously, creates in the reader's mind an expectation of a 'good' story. Thereafter, the reader is likely to be disappointed when the exact opposite unfolds, but the whole idea was for the positive statement to heighten the anxiety.

Kofi's father, Nani, is a proud Catholic. Apart from being an interpreter and a choirmaster at church, he is also a professional teacher and a good administrator, making him the obvious choice for the Mission to send on transfers now and then to revamp '... struggling young schools' (p.189). In all of this, however, he is uncompromising and unyielding, refusing even simple conciliatory concessions, especially at home. He uses his Catholic faith as an unbridled licence to inflict unpleasant and sometimes needless injuries on Kofi for the slightest mistake. In some instances, he threatens, 'I will beat you like a snake' (p.48), and carries it out with anguish and devastating rigidity, as admitted by Kofi: 'That day he really beat me like a snake' (p.127) (my emphasis). The protagonist's bitter childhood experiences bring to the fore what Kofi goes through as he comes to realise that the atmosphere at home is oppressive. Selormey, however, does not follow through with the genre's traditional format of making those bitter experiences the cause of Kofi's unceremonious exit from his father's home.

Nani's cruel and unreasonable behaviour clearly has the potential to demean Kofi's standing before his friends (pp.175-176), and no wonder he appears timid and longs to be free. Kofi recognises his restrictions and strives to overcome them by first expressing a yearning for 'liberty': 'Oh, how I envied those children: their carefree, outdoor life... no cane...' (p.108). At other times, he resorts to mischievous and dangerous pranks to disrupt routine and find a way around the choking atmosphere created by Nani. At this point, in keeping with the Bildungsroman, Kofi shows discomfort at home, which should trigger a (long) journey out of his father's house.

Selormey displays a distinctive narrative style in his contribution to advancing the concept of the Bildungsroman. This is significant, as it confirms that he was not parroting the 'template' of the traditional German Bildungsroman, which demands that the 'intellectual child-protagonist' begins to show signs of 'awakening' and that this is a sufficient and incontestable reason for him to leave the 'repressive atmosphere of home ... to make his way independently to the city' (Buckley 1974, p.18). Selormey's portrayal of Nani's callous behaviour should provide the basis for Kofi's '... way ... to the city'. He, however, designs a different route for Kofi, ensuring that, though he goes out of his father's stuffy home, he does so not based on the repressive conditions prescribed by the age-old Bildungsroman genre.

The harsh negative experiences that Kofi endures would have continued if not for another transfer by the Catholic Mission. As a consequence, Kofi leaves for Keta to continue his education and stays with a master. Eliot's views (1932) in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' maintain that tradition does not mean that a writer should forego his novelty to imitate (wholesale) the work of his predecessor. Bloom's poetics (1997) reiterates this assertion when he maintains that the 'anxiety of influence' should encourage modern writers to carve a niche for themselves. Selormey establishes a unique 'trademark' for himself by re-echoing parallels of Bildung at this point in his storytelling, but at the same time carefully avoids being caught in the web of copying. Selormey allows Kofi to embark on a journey in which he meets people who will positively impact his life, thereby achieving the second phase of his development.

Despite the Bildungsroman's foreign and selfish antecedents, Selormey adopts that unique posture to present 'a coming-of-age' story with a characteristic African flavour. To achieve success, insofar as the genre is concerned, Kofi necessarily leaves on that journey; the African flavour is, however, introduced to show that the African novelist abhors apeing as a means of reaching his goal; that trip is not contingent on Nani's cruelty.

Selormey's intent to Africanise the Bildungsroman is evident in his succinct explanation of living with a master in Chapter 5. The custom, *inter alia*, is to allow young boys and girls to live with married couples as part of the family to be trained. Kofi goes to Keta to live with his master because the location of his father's new 'place was primitive' (p.190), and, as his father tells him, 'You left my house only because there was no suitable school for you' (p.271). This coincidence, as captured by Selormey, can also be interpreted as a narrative necessity; it is left to circumstance, which compels Nani's behaviour, to create an

outlet for Kofi's remission. It has to be borne in mind, however, that Selormey is clearly following the general Bildungsroman 'structure' of 'the image of a man in the process of becoming' (Bakhtin, 1986, p.19).

Kofi's comparison of his condition with that of the other children's '... carefree, outdoor life... no cane...' (p.108) leads him to admit that he needs liberty from the many limitations of childhood. This ignites in him a burning desire to be free, which makes him 'accept' (not that he had a choice, though) the journey to Keta. Keta introduces him to people who mentor him towards the attainment of manhood.

Kofi gets to stay with a nameless 'master' in Keta. Though barely mentioned in this important developmental exercise for Kofi, the 'master' (and his place) provides all the necessary ingredients, such as space, atmosphere and people, to guide Kofi, who needs role models, to grow from a child into a man. The master, including his home in Keta, is very significant in Kofi's development. First of all, he provides a platform that gives Kofi a free yet controlled environment for the necessary transition to manhood. The master's home is a place that barely uses the cane but maintains firm discipline. Secondly, the master allows Kosi, another boy in the master's house who has benefited from his good training, to 'micro-manage' Kofi. In this regard, Kosi becomes the elder brother that Kofi never had, whilst the master remains the supervisor from a distance. Kosi helps Kofi to master the chores in the house in no time, and as Kofi himself acknowledges later,

To my own surprise, I discovered that I had become fastidious. I did not enjoy eating from a common dish with the other boys... I also found that my life with my master had made me value orderliness and quietness. Here, there were neither... Mealtimes were irregular, and noise was continuous (p.276).

Thirdly, in the Bildungsroman genre, mentorship is a cardinal aspect that supports the protagonist's psychological and physical growth. The mentor's shining qualities instil in the mentee a sense of hunger and a strong desire to achieve his goal. Kofi's earlier (non-verbalised) admission of being inferior to Kosi and Boro renders him ready for mentoring. Kosi acts as a role model for Kofi, helping him find his social and emotional balance, which is crucial to his transition into manhood and to becoming a responsible adult.

The value of the mentorship Kosi provides, as designed by the novelist, is truly appreciated when Kosi leaves for another school, thereby leaving the fledgling Kofi to face the future by himself. Kofi tests his burgeoning maturity

when his interaction with the confidence tricksters lays bare the reality that he has not fully matured; clearly, maturity manifests in the protagonist's character when he is seen to be tough and decisive. In Kosi's absence, he vacillates in the practical world of the learning curve and is unsure of his potential and capacity to stand up to evil. Though he eventually matures, the bitter lessons remain with him. It is part of the protagonist's development, as he explores his being at times, to cast off the remnants and rust of adolescence as he redefines his identity for the final lap of his transition into adulthood.

The testing of his independent-mindedness and apparent maturity begins when Kofi goes on another journey to Abor for a holiday, coinciding with Nani's transfer to Ho. The only option is for the family to stay in Kofi's grandfather's house at Ho, as there is no money to rent a house. Though not conducive, Nani insists that staying in his father's house is final. Kofi has to run away from his grandfather's house, as his father continues to beat him for the 'crime' of visiting his mother, who refuses to accompany them to his grandfather's house. Nani's insensitivity in attacking Kofi only points to his deceptive ideology that the phallus is the central element in the social order; in disagreements with his family, his words must hold sway. Nani is eventually seen as drained of every ounce of authority when he relents and pays Kofi a visit at his mother's in Keta.

This uniqueness exhibited by Selormey in testing Kofi's emotional balance, maturity and full formation results in the protagonist showing perseverance, resolve and firmness of purpose, characteristics which are either non-existent or at the gestation level before he goes to Keta. The bravery and determination displayed by Kofi, which are borne out of successful growth and full development, bring the mother, father and siblings together again under one roof, even if it means his father agreeing to a cheap 'house of coconut-palm screens' (p.289) for an abode not suited to the status of a teacher. This symbolises a drop in Nani's status; now, the teacher/headmaster finds himself at the low ebb of society. But, through this strategic and pragmatic shelter, the whole family coheres and comes to live together.

By dint of hard work, Kofi passes and receives his School Leaving Certificate. Due to the maturity he has attained and the discovery of his identity, he wears his kente over one shoulder 'as the men do' (p.297); indeed, he is a man, and his independent decisions, no matter the consequences, pay off. Without discussing it with Nani, Kofi decides to become a teacher and realises this dream by attending a teacher-training school. He is a big boy and admits that 'I felt grown-up, almost a different person from the silly little boy who had gone home last year' (p. 264). This admission

is highly significant in the genre, as one cardinal feature of it is that the protagonist shows an 'awareness of a change and growth, precisely the awareness that lies at the centre of the Bildungsroman' (Miles, 1974, p.981); the realisation of this change means he has reached adulthood, which also means he is capable of taking independent decisions. He goes off to the teacher training college as he has decided.

In the works of the Bildungsroman genre, and in accordance with the dictates of Buckley's (1974) 'template', the protagonist should '... visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice.' (p.18). Selormey could readily have had Kofi show his success, but perhaps, to show what he also brings to the genre, he has us see Kofi preparing for the next stage in achieving his dream of becoming a teacher. This, among other deviations, proves that Selormey is not imitating the works of the 'great writers'. Through these deviations, he has established a unique identity for himself.

Kofi is confident; he shall surely be the achiever and future fortress of his family. Even though Nani dies before Kofi attains the age of 24, Selormey uniquely departs from the norm, thereby allowing Kofi to become a fully formed man and take charge of affairs. He is confident and will surely return when he has attained full teacher status to contribute his quota to his family and the development of society.

Selormey's narrative structure and style in *The Narrow Path* reflect elements of the traditional Bildungsroman, which help us appreciate Kofi's evolution from 'that little boy' to 'a man', culminating in his show of defiance, decisive judgement and a balance in his emotions. The novel utilises the prototypical 'boy' protagonist who grows out of the prevailing conflicts, undergoes trials that toughen him along the learning curve, and eventually finds his new, mature identity. In presenting this Bildungsroman portrait, the role of Kofi's master (and his Keta abode) must receive special mention, as it provides the platform for that transformation, and Kofi wholeheartedly embraces it for the eventual attainment of his self-esteem.

Selormey's deviations in *The Narrow Path*, which exemplify one of the stylistic choices that distinguish his skill, are also seen as a personal (Africanised) contribution to the genre; he must not be seen as aping or parroting the Bildungsroman tradition. He contributes significantly to the literary tradition in tune with the distinct needs of his society. As Bloom notes in *The Anxiety of Influence*, predecessors will always be 'seen' in modern writers' works. Still, the determination to maintain one's originality is an issue discussed in this study, and it proves that Selormey did not copy Goethe's or Wieland's skills, nor the

general Bildungsroman genre. Selormey's bold artistic skills, which demonstrate his originality and individuality, are evident in the deviations/contributions mentioned in the study. It will not be too ambitious to claim that Selormey has proven that his efforts at carving a unique identity for himself demonstrate the metaphor of 'Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads...' (Bloom, 1997, p.11); it is creativity between equals. The unique efforts by Selormey unite him with his predecessors in the genre, placing him within the same tradition (Eliot, 1930).

Conclusion

This paper interrogated the ongoing debates that have kept African narratives on the margins of the Bildungsroman genre. It used Selormey's *The Narrow Path* as a microcosm of African stories of 'becoming' to argue for expanding the boundaries of the Bildungsroman tradition, and to show that African writers can tell their stories in forms that suit their own contexts. In doing so, Selormey does not abandon originality, and he avoids the impression of merely imitating his predecessors. He focuses on the theme of 'coming of age' and controls the plot until Kofi attains maturity and a sense of self. The novel is also used to show how the particular experience of Kofi connects to broader, universal concerns of identity and growth. Selormey's work thus contributes to the call for decentring literary creativity and criticism from the West, allowing individual nations to claim their unique literatures while remaining part of the wider tradition. As long as new writers maintain meaningful connections to what has come before, the world can embrace a blend of literary traditions that enriches global literature.

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