

## Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie De Boy* (1956) as "Bildungsroman"

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### Abstract

Like most all African novels before 1960 and others following there after, this novel has been seen mainly as an anti-colonial novel that belongs like many others to the genre of "littérature engagée." This was simply because it was the perspective that best suited its European readership view of Africa. Crying out against the ills, even in form of satire, of colonialism and European imperialism, and expansionism has in most cases overshadowed any other literary merit some of these novels may and do have, viewed from other literary perspectives, even within the European paradigm. This, this paper thinks, is the case with Oyono's *une vie de boy* (1956) where the clearly hilarious naivety and innocence of Toundi, the protagonist, is used to ridicule colonialism, the colonial man, his mentality and the Christian religion. In this paper an attempt is made to focus on Toundi entirely as an evolving character, although it apparently turns out tragic, from the literary perspective of "Bildungsroman" coming-of-age-novel.

### Introduction

The genre "Bildungsroman", also known as educational novel, or coming-of-age novel can be said to have attained literary lime light, following the publication by the great German author of all times, Goethe of, the novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* 1795-96, in which a young persons evolution to self consciousness, and acceptance of the reality of life in society are portrayed.

A kind of education or acquisition of knowledge, through personal experience, in which society, environment and nature as a whole work together as a *Magister Severus* is the hard school of life.

One of the distinguishing factors of this genre is the declared intention of the young protagonist right from the on set to undertake this tutorial journey himself as an ultimate goal. For example in Goethe's work, Wilhelm declares "mich selbst, ganz wie ich da bin auszubilden" (V,3) and added earlier also typical of the genre "endlich einmal aufzutreten und den Menssh in das Herz hinein zu reden, was sie sich so lange zu hören sehnten" (T, 16) certainly no mean undertaking.

The translation of this novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* into English in 1824 by Thomas Carlyle, inspired, such great works in English literature in this genre like *Tom Sawyer* ( ) *David Copperfield* (1860-61) by Dickens; *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Bronte, among others.

In France works like J.J. Rousseau's *Emile*, Voltaire's *Candide* and Flaubert's *Education Sentimentale* were in this genre and became classics.

Italy, in Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* also does have a strong voice. It is thus seen that the genre grew through out Europe and beyond.

However, going back in literatures of the world, the precursor to this genre is found in Arabic literature in the work *Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan* by Ibn Tufail in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in which a wild little boy on an island in the Indian Ocean, sets about to investigate and discover himself, after the death of his gazelle mother.

It was out of the ideas of "Aufklaerung" in Germany that this idea of "Bildungsroman" was born in Goethe mind. As an ideal which deal with human experience, the "Bildungsroman" was bound to live into the future. Unlike the ideas of literary periods of history, for example, Barock, Expressionism, Impressionism, Classics, Romantiesm etc, the "Bildungsroman" was certainly to evolve to types.

These other types although they would have the idea of formation, education, self-education and experiencing in society, were bound to hold nuances or difference as the years went by, for writers were bound to use the style in portraying aspects of ever evolving society, in culture and culture clashes. This certainly is the case when we try to see in this paper the aspects of "Bildungsroman" in a novel generally approached in literary circles from the perspective of anti-colonial, protest, or denunciation, as its type.

This paper feels justified in handling the story of *Une vie de boy* from the perspective of a Bildungsroman, when one considers among other things the statements attributed to the protagonists of the work by Goethe and Oyono, as their aim in following the formation. Wilhelm states "mich selbst, ganz wie ich da bin auszubilden" (V, 3) and earlier on states that his aim was, um "endlich einmal aufzutreten und den Menschen in das Herz hinein zu reden, was sie sich so lange zu hoeren schnten (I, 16), all as already mentioned before.

Toundi in his part in *Une vie de boy* states "j'allous connaitre la ville et les blancs et vivre comme eu" (P. 22) and later when circumstances transfer his services to the house of "le commandant" he already appreciates his "elevation" on becoming as he puts it "le chien du roi et le roi des chiens" clearly emphasizing his process of growth and vantage point for more information about the society and white community.

The role that “Schicksal” destiny, plays in the lives of the two heroes as in other of this genre is only strong to be ignored.

The accident that led to the death of his priest benefactor and change of service post is a situation which he could not change, not to mention the death of his parents, since he could no longer return to the village. “Mes parents sont morts. Je ne suis jamais retourné au village” (P.23).

On the aspect of destiny, in Wilhelm’s life process, Kluge and Radler write “Wilhelm ist der passive Held, der sich durch die, “bildende kraft in der Welt” (Körner) leiten laesst. Diese bildende kraft “aber ist zerlegt in verschiedene Kraefte, die als Begebenheiten und Figuren Wilhelms Weg bestimmen”.

So, like in the “Lehrjahre” unforeseen events and persons surface in *Une Vie de boy*, which in fact, as in a conspiracy move the novel forward.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century work by Ibn Tufail, mentioned above, it is the sudden death of the gazelle mother, an event the wild boy could not foresee or prevent, that left the protagonist with no option but to fall back on his raw strength of mind for self discovery and unfoldment.

### **The story of *Une Vie de boy***

Due to a violent and brutal father a young African boy is forced by fear of being continually battered by his father to run away from home and take refuge in the mission with a catholic priest during the colonial era in the Cameroon. He is consequently baptized and given the name Joseph. Warmly received, he sees a new life open before him and so refuses to return to the village with his father, when the later comes for him. In his new home he sees the chance to navigate the waters of the world of the Whiteman, develop along their lives and live a different and “improved life”.

However, tragedy strikes, his benefactor father priest dies in an accident and he is sent off to serve the Commandant head of administration of the colonial region of his area. Here the possibility of complete transformation looms large. He slowly unravels the intimacies of the European community and grows in admiration and doubt.

The arrival of the adulterous wife of the Commandant becomes the “verhaengnisvolles Ereigniss” that truncates Toundi’s education in the ways of the Whiteman. In a way she becomes his femme fatale. He has learnt to read and write, keeps a diary and it is from this diary that the story of the novel is related in diary entry form by his compatriot holidaying in Spanish Guinea, who finds him late at night, dying, deep in the forest, having managed to escape from the brutal consequences and hateful accusations heaped on his childlike innocence and uprightness by a society which although he wished it, he would never have come to know or be integrated into.

### **BILDUNGSROMAN: A DEFINITION**

Having in the introduction put the novel *Une Vie de boy* side by side with the work that brought the genre Bildungsroman into literary prominence, the paper now turns to a definition of the genre in order to apply it to the body of the work from that perspective.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia the Bildungsroman is “a genre of the novel which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood” change is extremely important. Usually at the beginning of the story there is an emotional loss which makes the young person leave on his journey, usually for maturity which the protagonist achieves gradually and with difficulty (01-09-2011)

### **Toundi’s emotional loss and departure from home**

Like a typical hero of a Bildungsroman, Toundi had to have a reason for leaving home, and seeking change. In his case it was the cruelty, brutality and magister Severus character of his father, who sought to teach the son a bitter lesson by corporal punishment that drove the little boy away on the eve of his initiation into the adolescent rites of passage and manhood of his tribe.

Following a scuffle with another little boy which later involved their mothers and escalated into near bloodshed between two heads of families, Toundi’s father now turns his rage on his son accusing him of uncontrolled “gourmandise” which according to him “nous perdra” (P. 17). He then proceeded to viciously assault the little boy with a big stick and the boy tries to dodge the strokes to the annoyance of his father.

The father goes as far as to evoke traditional abominations against the earth goddess, so as to compel Toundi through fear to deliver himself to this undeserved brutality. “Si tu esquives encore, c’est que tu peux coucher avec ta grande mère, ma mère!” (P. 19).

Even when the boy pleads «Pardonne-moi, Père!...je ne ferai plus... » (P. 18) he replies «...je vais te battre jusqu’à ce que je ne sois plus en colère» (P. 19). God alone would know when.

Toundi’s defiance and self assertion for self discovery starts when he says to his father in the mist of the turbulence. “je ne t’ai pas insulté et je ne peux pas coucher avec ma mère ni la tienne! Et je ne veux plus être battu et c’est tout”.

The father outraged addresses him as “une goutte de mon liquid que me parle ainsi! Arrete-toi ou je te maudis!” (P.19)

Toundi shows his final defiance before his decision to depart by refusing to surrender willingly to his father’s savagery. The later then closes the episode with “Pour entrer dans la case, ton chemin passe par le trou de mon anus”. An impossibility.

Toundi now totally confused and confounded «je ne savais ou me refugier» (P. 19) must make a decision.

Then as Toundi’s father and the uncle use hunger as a legitimate instrument of war “Si vous voulez qu’il vous obéisse ... privez-le de nourriture” (P. 20) and Toundi hears his mother cry, the bond seems to snap as he states “Pour la première fois de ma vie, je pensai a tuer mon père” (P. 21).

Our protagonist then turns to the priest’s house and after much agonizing, fear and hesitation “... je frappai a la case du prêtre blanc”... “il me donna les restes de son repas qui me parut étrange et délicieux”. (P. 21). The beginning of a new experience. He ends up as he says, «je compris que j’étais agréé” and “C’est ainsi que je devins le boy du révérend père Gilbert” (P. 21).

The old world was now behind him, dead for him for even as his father came to «amicably » ask him home he would not bulge ; the final brake was when he is emotionally moved to cry with his visiting mother who blesses him and wishes him well. This he reports as “... me bénissait et que si un jour je tombais malade je n’aurais qu’a me baigner dans aux rivières pour être guérir (P. 22).

### **TOUNDI’S BILDUNG PART 1. The outward journey**

The formation, moral and psychological development of the protagonist of the novel Une Vie boy is rightly divided into two parts. The first part rather short but of vital importance, is the stay with the priest. It made the whole story possible. It is in this part that he surmounts the fundamental difference between the African and the European, the ability to read and write. The core of growth and development.

The consequences that led to his starting his voyage of enfoldment have already been discussed so in this part we shall handle the changes he goes through and how these slowly transform him into a completely different person.

The first transforming factor is that he is now dressed in a different way “Le père Gilbert me donna une Culotte khaki et un tricot rouge qui firent l’admiration de tous les gamins de fia...” (P. 22).

The emotional and psychological achievement if not victory that Toundi feels here can be hardly imagined. He feels like an other self when compared to the other young people. He is now new, clothed in the stuff brought by the Whiteman, a colourful red top and bottom khaki, symbol of toughness and hard work in the colonial period. This was the first step in his hoped integration into the ways of the white man, he longed and dreamed for.

The satisfaction and sense of having made the right decision is even heightened when other boys of the village now come to the priest and ask that they be taken into his service. Of course there was no vacancy. Toundi had become a hero overnight.

Two days later the whole new experience and change was to explode in into exhilarating ecstasy and share life in realistic fantasy as Tondi says “Deux jours plus tard le père Gilbert me prit sur sa motocyclette, dont le bruit semait la panique dans tous les villages que nous traversions..... j’étais heureux la vitesse me graissait.” (P.22)

Sure enough the speed would intoxicate him, not just the speed, the life, the environment, the esteem he received from his peer group. One would like to know what his father would feel seeing his son on a motorcycle. That’s however out of the focus of this paper not to talk of the joy it would have planted in the mother.

It is after he returns from the two weeks motorcycle safari with his benefactor that he makes his famed Bildungsroman declaration “J’allais connaître la ville et les Blancs, et vivre comme eux.”

In his voyage of self discovery, he even imagines himself like the little parrots they attract to the village with grains of corn who end up prisoners of their greed. It was like a sad but unsuspected premonition.

Toundi can not be compared to greed or considered greedy. It is the genuine expression of an innate tendency in man, that of quest of discovery, of allowing the self to unfold, which was the thrust of “Aufklaerung” ideas which were really the precursor of scientific investigation in Europe “Sapere aude” (Kant). This was the motto of Enlightenment and personal enfoldment, even if it would be gradual and difficult.

With his new environment and growing psychological and moral confidence, Toundi was now charged with duty, responsibility if not authority, and with a sense of purpose had to be now time conscious. Now at the mission at Dangan «je me reveille tous les matins a cinq heures et même plus tôt parfois quand tous les prêtres sont a la mission» (P.23).

He was time keeper and regulated people’s lives. He served at Mass an issue of high office in the Roman Catholic church, not just in one but in several and had knelt so much, the skin of his knee had become insensitive to the touch of the floor and had become “aussi dure que celle d’un crocodile” (P. 23) and he had

started having the impression he was kneeling on a cushion.

As Mass boy he makes another discovery about the white as he says “Ils n’ont pas de belles dents” (P. 23) although he does not describe any mental or physical reaction to this discovery stating it rather as a matter of fact issue or confirmation.

Even when he caresses the chin of young European girls while they are being served communion, he makes no comment that may be unbecoming in such circumstances as to the kind of feeling this “mischievous act gave him. He only says “C’est par ce moyen que nous pouvons les caresser” considering that the whites took their communion on a different platform. He introduces us into his experiences in the mission, the third being their ability to eat meat only from the priest’s left-over.

Interesting, considering that he had the possibility of savouring the “porc-epic” in the village.

The hero himself towards the end of the first part of his experiencing the world of the white man, which is the part which he considers an education, tells of his transformation from the village. “je dois ce que je suis devenu au père Gilbert, je l’aime beaucoup mon bienfaiteur... quand j’étais petit,-me considérait comme un petit animal familier” and presented him with pride to the wives of Dangan as his boy “qui sais lire et écrire, servir la messe, dresser le couvert, balayer sa chambre, faire son lit” (P. 24). He earned no money but gifts from his benefactor. What a transformation!

He attests to the fact that before he came to the priest he was like a tabula-rasa,-blank-innocent but promising and full with the spirit of investigation and the hunger to know, a typical character of a Bildungsroman hero. “Le père Gilbert m’a connu nu, comme un ver, il m’a appris à lire et à écrire. – Rien ne vaut cette richesse bien que je sache maintenant ce que c’est que d’être mal habillé...” (P. 24).

After this diary entry which in a senses closes the conscious education part of Toundis Bildung, the sudden an accidental death of father Gilbert like a bolt out of the blues intervenes like a Deus ex machina, to redirect and change the course of the story. The schicksal effect. Toundi is now to enter the part of his “Bildung” which is completely a matter of destiny and chance over which he has absolutely no control. Events intervene in quick succession and apparent happy entries are followed by disastrous consequences seemingly manipulated by unseen forces that head him towards tragedy in his formation or now deformation.

Even his trusted new employer the commandant seems helpless and is finally forced by circumstance to which he had no choice but to surrender, to non-chalantly look the other way, while Toundi is taken away for slaughter, despite the trust that had existed between them. “Je suis chrétien mon commandant, répondis-je en exhibant fièrement la médaille de saint Christophe que je porte a mon cou” P. 33. Toundi was a man to trust.

## Part II

In handling the second part of his formation, where he now, living in society, is exposed to its vagaries, Toundi finds himself in a position where his continued experiencing and formation, is tantamount to exposing society to its ills and weaknesses, even if he did not intend it, and he didn’t for he always acted in innocence and ignorance. If the father Gilbert thought him a tabula rasa, on which he had the freedom to write what he felt was right, and integrated him into his life, his new environment saw in him not just a potential enemy but a complete agent of espionage, who would lay bare their secrets, reveal to it what it did not want to hear. What Toundi now does or represents can be said to be equivalent to Wilhelm, when he says in an already mentioned quote “endlich um mal auf zutreten un den Menschen in das Herz hinun zu reden, was sie sich so lange zu hoeren sehnten”. If Wilhelm was to show “dem bürgerlichen stand” to which he belonged what they should be or become, Toundi was to reveal to the colonial society its failings, and shame of colonialism and the Christian religion in Africa.

Toundis, formation now turns into a “travail pénible”. Perhaps the advice given to him by the commandant following the minor assault on him consequent on his childishness warns him to forget his childish pas and stand up like a man. It was a kind of premonition. “Joseph, commença-t-il agis comme un homme, et surtout pense à ce que tu fais hein!” (P. 37).

He was in a new; another world.

The first experience was that of now being kicked by the commandant in assault for no reason. For him however “cela faisait parti de mon metier de boy”. That was only the beginning, for the colonial society was going to show him much more physical and emotional brutality and he will have now where to run to until the final flight unto death.

The lessons he learns on brutality continue as the entry that details the night raid of Gosier d’oiseau on the indigenous settlement. During this raid Toundi comes face to face with mans inhumanity to man for no reason. Although he fails to philosophize or express any opinion on the issue, it is apparent that the walls of his life and education were closing in on him, and he had to live in it as a helpless on-looker; for it was nothing else but the path of his education. The prison director made no arrest because the African guard gave away their presence and the Africans escaped into the bushes. A lesson in fraternity which reveals how incapacitated the colonizers were without co-operation from Africans. «Au cours de sa rafle d’hier soir, Gosier d’oiseau n’a eu personne. Il a mangé des bananes» le gradé noir avait alerté le quartier» P. 40.

Toundi's education difficult as it was went through the events of his experiences in the hands of society through the discoveries he makes.

The agricultural engineer threatens him, when Toundi is compelled to share a room with Sophie and Sophie accuses him of not being a man "on dirait que ton coupe n'est pas trenchant (P.68).

The whole concept of an educational process for Toundi is made clear by his never acting in anger or seeking to take it back on society, despite opportunities that came h is way. He even sees any such act as unbecoming. When Sophie regrets a lost occasion "de m'enrichir" (P. 42) Toundi wonders, "Tu veux donc empêcher ton Blanc de retourner dans son pays" (P. 42).

Definitely any such act would have truncated his experiences and education.

No doubt Toundi is learning fast. When he describes a Mass at Dangan, it is now with a certain aloofness that he did not have while with the late père Gilbert: He now paints the picture of the discrimination in the church quite vividly "Les Blancs ont leur saint table apart."

Showing further what he has come to acquire as education about the church and the white man's religiousness, he shocks Mrs. Descazy when in a conversation he clear states the "worthlessness" of his so called baptism and name Joseph. "oui Madame, Chrétien comme ca" "Chrétien pas grande chose" "Chrétien parce que le prêtre – ma verse l'eau sur la tête en me donnant un nom de blanc..." (P. 88) and when his madame says she thought he was a believer, he retorts nonchalantly "il faut bien croire comme ca aux histoires de Blancs" (P. 88) and as for the European god, well "la rivière ne remonte pas a sa source" (P. 88).

This certainly is the "Auesserung" of some one who has acquired education and is no longer a "tabula rasa".

This seems to set the tone for Toundi's further experiences as nature personified in the characters of the novel takes him through his fatal education.

Toundi from total respect for the commandant makes the "shocking" experience of seeing him uncircumcised and for him from then on "...le commandant ne me fait plus peur..... je me suis demande pourquoi j'avais tremblé devant lui" (P. 45). There was a visible change in his comportment and for the commandant "Tue es devenue complètement maboul" (P. 45).

If the affair with the commandant was a shock, the revelations about Mrs. Descazy were a scandal of unimaginable dimension. Toundi going from "mon bonheur n'a pas de jour, mon bonheur n'a pas de nit... désormais ma main est sacrée..... ne connaîtra plus les bases régions de mon corps" (P. 74) and following an intoxicating eulogizing of his «reine» he concludes «....j'ai peur de moi-même» (P. 74).

From this refined feeling and respect almost divine for his master's wife, Toundi's experiencing arrives at the negative point where he now sings a song, that is sung when someone is dying "ferme la porte sainte Pierre..... et suspends tes clés" (P. 22).

The beautiful queen and dazzling morning ray was dying, fading away and had become "vraiment potopoto" (P. 113).

So Toundi has been through it all in this educational journey and experiencing, where he like a lone traveler through a foreign, strange and exotic land maintained a travelogue for memory but he did not "fais vieux os" to tell the story himself.

The unprovoked conflict that arose between him and the shameless and adulterous wife of the commandant was only the home stretch in his education that led to his unplanned graduation without a graduation ceremony.

Before attaining this class he had learned it all. The foreign food, the ride on a motorcycle on priestly tours, serving at Mass, becoming literate, keeping a white man's house clean, serving at European receptions, visit to schools, European club weekends, madam's reception, nightly raids on Africans, share inhumanity, brutality, dehumanizing brutality, verbal insults, religious deceit and falsehood, hypocrisy, intra European quarrels, European sexual easy virtues, African total surrender without a fight, outright dumb submission, but also saving African fraternity, finally delivered him from direct death in the hands of the owners of the life's school he attended.

Toundi did not live to enjoy the fruits of his education. He could not have. However, like is common in African culture, the ancestors leave something for the coming ages, hence they are worshipped. Toundi with the help of the white mans knowledge was able to leave something for posterity for which he will be remembered. The lesson of his "Bildung".

## Conclusion

In this work an attempt has been made to see Oyono's Une vie de boy from a completely different perspective which may on initial consideration even receive outright rejection from some quarters. For much too long Africa has always in the European paradigm been seen from one view and no other. Of course so, because only the European is looking and we all have to see through his eyes even when he is blind.

There is no doubt the novel can be seeing as anti-colonial and from the perspective of Europe it is the

idea, “qui sauté aux yeux” – littérature engagée.

At the back of the English translation published by Heinemann in the African writer series we read about Toundi in the summary of the novel “His dream is of all advancement and improving himself, and to do this he studies his new world closely – too closely....” What else is the protagonist of a Bildungsroman supposed to do.

The genre therefore we think aptly applies to this work and even many others of its kind. There may be an attempt of classify it, following this consideration as a “negative Bildungsroman” this is to us unacceptable because the hero although he ends tragically, did fulfill his aim and ambition of learning and knowing the colonial society and ways of the European and coming to grips with it.

Many times he was pushed to do what he considered inappropriate or to abandon ship and take to flight but he resolutely held on till the inevitable end of the educational process. Inevitable end but not destined and for matters may have turned out other wise.

Into this education his matriculation was an escape in a night without option, as his graduation was also an escape in a night without option, his education completed. There was nothing more to live for. To others through his hard education he has passed the baton of the race of life. It is for them to, while running take a good look and see what should and can be done at every stage so that in restoring the dignity of man, “our dignity and their dignity is also restored” (Timm. 1978).

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