

EXPLORING THE 'I' IN THE BILDUNGSROMAN: INDICES OF IFEMINISM IN BISI ADJAKPON'S OF WOMEN AND FROGS

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ABSTRACT

Dissent voices in gender studies have taken root in the pillars of literary criticism in contemporary fiction. The perplexity of the bildungsroman as a novel whose protagonist is ever-changing and evolving reflecting the Cultural Revolution, sexual honesty and psychological realism poses as a significant aspect of a literary genre worthy of attention. Hence, it becomes paramount to scan the views of gender discourses with the tenets of the bildungsroman. Conceptually, the paper undertakes a symbiotic analysis of individual feminism and the bildungsroman genre using the growth process of the feminine protagonist in Bisi Adjakpon's *Of Women and Frogs*. Further, the paper highlights the extent the individual can assert her individuality alongside, scaling the expense of such freedom. The mushrooming elements of bodily freedom, the choice for abortion, right to peaceful enjoyment of the body, and the like are examined vis-à-vis the bildungsroman's protagonist who is constantly in the quest for self-assertion and individuation. Although the bildungsroman as a genre in contemporary African fiction has been widely discussed, there seems to be a dearth in the critiquing of tenets of individual feminism as a critical aspect of the growth process of the protagonist. This paper seeks to partake in filling this critical gap. It is discovered that the individual is mostly determined to accentuate their freedom and right to bodily enjoyment but with the consciousness of morality and the spiritual which is the watchdog of the individual. There is also no private resolution but a group solidarity for this freedom.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Bodily Freedom, Individual Feminism, Individuality, Ifeminism

1.0 INTRODUCTION

An intuitive paradigm shift has occurred in the writings of women across the countries in Africa especially with a new wave of feminist consciousness emanating first from Europe and America transcending to Africa. The twenty first century African women writers have taken this quantum leap to address issues of concern to the feminine gender in highly patriarchal African society where both race and gender bedevil the modern African woman on one hand and on the other the eye-brow raising womanist feminists of the nineteenth and twentieth

century attempting to limit the wish for freedom for the modern African woman. This breed of African women writers have a penchant for the use of the Bildungsroman genre to delineate their protagonists as they traverse physical and psychological borders, individuation of the self, self-assertion, sexual freedom while grappling with cultural and societal expectations, identity crises and gender marginalisation. Authors within this purview majorly reside in the west and shuttle between Africa and the west such as Chimamanda Adichie *Purple Hibiscus* and *Americanah*, Yaa Gyasi *Homegoing*, Noviolet Bulawayo *We Need New Names*, Akwaeke Emezi *Fresh Water*, Unuma Azuah *Sky High-Flames* and more recently Bisi Adjakpon *Of Women and Frogs* and *Daughter in Exile*. These writers have migrated to the west and have recorded massive sales in the international book market. Their success has propelled an academic inquiry to classify female writers of African fictions into generation according to their modus of handling sensitive gender issues in their thematic preoccupation.

African women writers have carved out milieus for themselves based on their thematic preoccupation and diversity in navigating the contorted issues of patriarchy and culture. Lumped together are the first generation and second generation women writers who had no substantial differences in their portraiture of the perils of women navigating motherhood, culture and societal expectations. Scholars are of the opinion that at the beginning of the nineteenth century male writers dominated the literary scene to express and address issues of colonialism and struggles against western subjugation and postcolonial disillusionment. The male writers used fiction as a form of anticolonial resistance and an employment of their 'master's craft' to write back to the centre exploring ideologies that eulogises that which is black. However, the novel as a veritable tool for expressing feminine ideologies became succinctly recognised by African women towards the end of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century weaving the first and second generation of women writers into an epoch, though their European counterparts had been in the writing scene decades and centuries prior to this time. The African woman writer, devolved the genre from the exclusiveness of male writers, especially with their portraiture of women as docile and specifically assigned to certain social and cultural roles to reflect a balanced change in the sexes in conformity with socio-political post-colonial. Women assert their will to evolve as the society evolves; no more the stereotype as having worth only in a man's kitchen and bedroom, but portray protagonists who are renegades to arranged marriages, female genital mutilation and polygamy borne out of their contact with Christianity and modern medical practice introduced by colonialism. Their heroines began to seek education as a means of empowerment and escape from rural agrarian life to modernity. Examples of such writers are Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta *Ama Ati Aidoo*, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, Bessie Head, Efua Sunderland, Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba, Nawal El Saadawi and the like.

However, what is pertinent to note is that these protagonists did not leave behind their assigned role of motherhood as they navigated these reformative process; but there is a supreme and ultimate price to pay for this freedom and attempt to cause this social change. Entrenched in these writings is the opinion that a harsh reality of circumventing change is ever fraught perils, it is not a smooth sail to Timbuktu especially in the face of patriarchal oppression and colonial domination. In delivering their mandate of creating a western and free personhood for women, they expose the dangers to take on such life changing decisions. For Nwapa, Efuru remains single, lonely, and childless and returns to her father's house as a result of her rebellion, Aidoo's Anowa drowns herself, Emecheta's Nnu Ego dies alone in a ditch, some of these

protagonists became mad, committed suicide and brutally raped and murdered. There is indeed a price for western freedom and civilization as portrayed by these writers hence leaving the ends open to the reader to choose to remain either with the traditional life of subjugation or revolt and end up in a ditch alone. Scholars have claimed that the second generation of women writers are subtly anti-western in their approach to feminist discourses because there is no outright success to their ventures. For instance, Yvonne Vera has been accused of tragicizing her protagonists as she reiterates in an interview with regards to her novels Phephelaphi and Mazvita:

Some women have said you make your female characters fail. You don't see them as succeeding. Phephelaphi doesn't become successful, Mazvita she ends up in despair, so what are you saying about women, that they don't accomplish anything? Of course I get annoyed with this kind of question, because my duty as a writer is to explore things as I see them (Primorac 2004: 163)

These writers, judging from the above, recreated society as it is perceived; that is, modernity in social reality is unattainable stressing the ambiguity and complex relatedness existing between a woman's quest for individuality, on one hand, and her cultural background on the other, both acting in a push and pull force relationship respectively while the woman strives for 'victor-hood' but victimhood prevails. Western individualism is a hoax for the first and second generation of women writers as Simon Gikandi (2007:p12) observes that they "did not exactly fit into the modern/traditional dyad that dominated discussions of African Literature" because they "insisted that modernity and tradition were not opposites but were imbricated in a common economy of time and space" and as Dobrota Pucherova (2022: p24-25) concludes that they were unable to "appropriate modernity because they saw an irreconcilable conflict between a woman's individualistic desires and her culture driven by a nationalist, family – and community-oriented ethos".

The twenty first century African women writers have broken free from the norm of tragicizing their protagonists who interrogate traditional norms and embrace modernism birthing a dissident voice of third generation African women writers. Recently, scholarly articles abound to illuminate this trend in African feminist discourse. Pumla Gqola (2017) opines that this novel form of African feminism comprise a global movement of people who recognise the injustice inherent in patriarchy and deinstitutionalize the otherness and inferiority conferred on the feminine gender. According to Gqola (2017:p58):

Feminism insists that women should be able to decide what to do with their bodies freely and without punishment or threats of violence. Feminists believe a woman should be able to choose what to do with her body, that reproduction is a choice not destiny, that women are entitled to sexual pleasure...and that nothing women do is asking for violence

Commenting on this philosophical standpoint, Pucherova (2022) bifurcates the new wave of feminism into three major aspects which consist of the recognition that African feminism is "part of a global movement against sexism", the refuting of traditional gender roles that were carried along by the previous generation of feminist writers, and finally the female body is both the site of oppression and of freedom. Chielozona Eze (2016) also affirms that this fundamental change in African literature has at its pivot the "rights and dignities of the body of woman"

(confirm date 2016 or 2014 ethical turn in African literature). Drawing inferences, it can be argued that the twenty first century African feminist writers have undertaken a vociferous departure from the twentieth century feminists giving way for new discourses on issues pertaining to freedom of the feminine body to sex and sexual pleasure, childbearing, abortion or adoption, contraception and indemnifying the woman's right as to be engrained as a fundamental human right which no cultural or moral institution has any justification to infringe on. Succinctly, as fundamental human rights are globally recognized across borders, nations, cultures and continents so should women's individual rights to her body or what I may term 'individual body sovereignty' be established and this has to be entrenched into Africa and African feministic philosophical underpinnings. It should not be a freedom for the Western woman alone but an all-woman-embracing autonomy, kicking race and ethnicity to the trenches.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Feminism and the birth of Ifeminism

Feminism dates back to the rise of a Women's Liberation Movement that began in Europe and America in the 18th century after the Reformation. As men in this age began to experience personal and political freedom, there awakened a consciousness in the women of the age to be free from the shackles that once held them bound and the need for them to also share in the liberty characteristic of the epoch. As a result of this consciousness, the passive roles which women were ascribed began to wane as their quest for liberation intensified. In Europe, Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) wrote what can be regarded as the feminist manifesto entitled 'Vindications of the Rights of women', wherein she stressed the need for women to be educated which is a means of subverting patriarchal domination. This essay lent credence to the consciousness and other scholars like John Stuart Mill seconded her standpoint in an essay titled "The Subjugation of women" in 1867. In America, the convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 signalled the birth of the first wave of feminism which fought for women's rights to equal status with men to vote and be voted for, legal rights, opportunities for education, employment and right to keep money earned.

However, after World War II, a kaleidoscope of ideologies began to emerge birthing a second wave of feminism which reproduced four major strands: Liberal, Radical, Marxist and Socialist feminism. The Liberal feminist is essentially traditional in nature as they recognise the centrality of the man in the life of a woman but crave for reforms that will address the economic and legal status of women. Lorber (1997:p9) describes the liberal feminist as engrossed with "visible sources of gender discrimination, such as gendered job markets, and inequitable wage scales and with getting women into positions of authority in the professions, government and cultural institutions". The short fall of this strand is that they tend towards the idea that men are superior to women.

Radical feminists, on the other hand, suggest a complete annihilation of patriarchy in the grand scheme of things and an establishment of a social order in which women are at the helm of affairs as noted by Lorber (2005). This resulted in a clash between this surge of feminism and the political cabal at the time. At the crux of Marxist feminism according to Nutsukpo Margaret Fafa (2020:p87) is the ideology that:

Capitalism is responsible for limiting women through issues such as inferior occupational and pay levels. They also regard the family as a domain where women are oppressed and exploited. They advocate economic independence as avenue through which women can gain their freedom and, therefore, call for changes in the economic structure of the society...

The implication of this is that the Marxist feminist sees the oppression of the woman as stemming from the man owning all the means of production. That is, a woman who is not financially independent will always be under patriarchal subjugation, hence, the struggle for economic standing. Socialist feminism acknowledges the intersection of gender and other categories of identity such as race, class and sexuality, drawing a nexus between racism, sexism and classism and the struggle of women. The woman can fully achieve her liberty if all other social struggles are eradicated.

Suffice to say that there is no one approach to a theory because after this second wave of feminist ideologies new postulations to the argument as to how should a woman be termed truly free has and what signals her retinue of oppressions have emerged hence Wendy McElroy (2003:p3) suggests that "there is no one feminism, there is no dogmatic position on issues. Feminism is and should be an ongoing dialogue among women...as long as the dialogue is civil the disagreement is a sign of health. Dissent is a vital aspect of what keeps theory alive and true; dogma is its death". There have been dissent voices in feminist approach with regards to literary criticism for instance, postmodern feminism, Black feminism, Ecofeminism looks at the interface between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the environment. Ajibola and Oboli (2022) are of the opinion that at the base of ecofeminist discourses are the correlation between the capitalist exploitation of natural resources and how these exploitations relate to women. Postcolonial feminism, drawing inspiration from postcolonial theory, challenges the marginalisation of women from the colonised regions and how subalterns are represented in literary works.

Ifeminism, an offspring of or a continuation of individualistic feminism, is championed by Wendy McElroy in her edited book titled *Liberty for Women: Freedom and Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. It is a stronger affirmation of the individualist feminism and tougher assertion of the 'I' in the word 'individual'. Ifeminism argues that the slogan "a woman's body, woman's right" should be extended to any choice a woman can make peacefully and these choices should be legally respected ranging from motherhood to pornography and sexual choices while the individual bears the risk of such freedom. Ifeminism insists that the individual peaceful choices of men and women should be protected by the law that protects persons and properties. (McElroy, 2002:p.6). She harangues that:

...Just as men and women share the same basic biological needs, we share the same basic political needs: the same rights and responsibilities. The most basic political human right is to the peaceful enjoyment of our own bodies and of our own property. The most basic political human responsibility is to respect the peaceful decisions other people make with their bodies and their property. At bare minimum, we must legally tolerate the peaceful choices of others, even if we do not personally respect those choices to be moral...

Considering the tenets of individualism, McElory's positions are as valid as they are apt especially in this time and age where modernism and individual freedom is professed. The issue of morality or spiritual consciousness becomes arbitrary especially in the enactment of laws regarding the restriction of women.

Ashlie Warnick (2003) regards Ifeminism as a branch of feminism based on classical liberal philosophy. Ifeminists view individual autonomy as paramount and believe that laws restricting women's choices do more harm than good.

This paper focuses on the enactment of the issues raised by Ifeminists and how Bisi Adjkpon has used the bildungsroman genre to clearly delineate how a woman attempts to assert her individuality in a patriarchal culture inadvertently revealing her maturation process.

2.2 The Bildungsroman and the rise of the feminist bildungsroman: Definition and conceptualization

The bildungsroman is regarded as a novel which beams its search light on and reflects the growth of an individual from childhood or innocence to a state of experience. It offers valuable insights into the development of characters and their psychological, moral and social growth. This growth process sometimes may be a reinforcement of social stasis within the society where the character exists and at other times it is a resistant rebellion against the status quo hence, aiming for social change which elicits tension between societal expectations and individual desires. Whatever the case may be, according to Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), what is vital about the genre is that at its heart is a person in the process of becoming, someone who emerges along with the world and who reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. Another key element of the bildungsroman is the protagonist's search for identity. As the individual matures and confronts the challenges of life, they are compelled to interrogate their own values, beliefs and desires. This quest for self-definition often is stimulated as the protagonist interacts with different social groups and comes in contact with diverse perspectives, there is a reassessment of their place within the world.

Undertaking a historical survey of fictional writings, Graham, S (2019) observes that the bildungsroman is a male dominated genre, highly conservative and orthodox propagated by the writings of Charles Dickens, J. D Salinger and Mark Twain but female writers have ventured into the genre to undermine and challenge heteronormative patriarchy and the assumption that the male experience is a collective shared experience of all the genders. The incursion of the female bildungsroman is a sentient attempt to dent the hegemony and offer women-centred accounts of the female in process of maturation. Fiona McCulloch (2022:p175) harangues this when she regards the female bildungsroman as a "playful jouissance...to probe and reassess rather than simply mimic hegemonic structures"

Upholding McWilliams, Fiona McCulloch as quoted by Graham (2022:p176) aptly describes the female bildungsroman as

Interrogating and reshaping the genre's traditions so that it is not simply defined by resemblance to the classic template, but it rather sustained in the mapping of an odyssey of selfhood in which the internal machinations of the self are foregrounded. This way, the female bildungsroman reinvigorates the genre. It is not an obsolete, static genre,

then but a format that can be revisited time and again and injected with political and theoretical impetus from feminism, postmodernism and so on ...

The all-embracing disposition of the female bildungsroman is evident as issues stemming from feminist discourses, patriarchy, postmodernism and diasporic tensions have been negotiated using the genre, hence, accentuating the fact that it reinvigorates the genre.

3.0 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Existing literatures in literary criticism have acknowledged the existence and complexities of issues in the female bildungsroman genre for instance Mythily P (2016) considers Chingiz Aitmatov's the first teacher as a female bildungsroman with emphasis on the protagonist's transition from girlhood to womanhood, Ogaga Okunyade (2010) examines childhood memories with reference to Nigerian novels in the bildungsroman genre where he x-rays fundamentally, Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, Lena M. Nunez (2017) wrote a thesis showing the model of the female Bildungsroman in George R.R Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, Webb Tracy Elizabeth (2015) underscores the quest motifs in three novels of Margaret Atwood, Cerdric Courtois stratifies the third generation of Nigerian female writer as employers of the bildungsroman genre to break free from the shackles of patriarchy using Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and Seffi Atta's Everything good will come. Though not exhaustive, there seem to be a dearth of scholarship in the analysis of bildungsroman from the perspective of individualist feminism and a critique of Bisi Adjakpon's Of women and frogs from the female bildung point of view. The impetus of this paper is to attempt a critiquing of Of women and frogs from an Ifeminist point of view stressing the individual struggle of the protagonist as she comes of age. The emphasis is to stress the 'rebellion' of the individual character pari passu the tenets of ifeminism with a view to broaden the body of literary criticism in the genre of the female bildungsroman.

The paper seeks to answer such questions as to: what extent and at what expense is the individual willing to pursue her individuality and assert her individualistic feminist consciousness against cultural tides? What is the place of morality in the trail for individual freedom? What role does strong and supportive relationships between female characters contribute to the individual's liberation?

3.1 Significance of the study

The study is significant as it relevant to literary critics and scholars in the field of feminism, African literature and the influx of women writers into bildungsroman narratives. It carves a new niche in literary scholarship as there is a dearth of scholarly representations in the new wave of feminism known as Ifeminism. Also, Bisi Adjakpon is a burgeoning writer and this paper would loud her creative prowess as she sprouts in African female writings.

3.2 Bisi Adjakpon's of women and frogs a bildungsroman in Ifeministic eye: a discursive approach

Of women and frogs traces the development of Esi from childhood to adulthood as she struggles against patriarchy as enforced by her father and the culture while attempting to fulfil her desire for independence and social change. In the main, she is represented as an individual

female character who singlehandedly strives to subvert the stasis of the status quo of marriage and child bearing while trapped in a loveless engagement of convenience while her sisters and other female characters endorse the stasis of patriarchal subjugation and absorb their father's slogan of "a woman's glory is her husband" (237). Using the propositions of the female bildungsroman as suggested by Okunyade O. (2010), and Mythily P (2016) the novel traces the psychological and moral development of Esi as she progresses from girlhood to adulthood leading to emotional and social maturity. Several factors accelerates her individuality as she evolves such as separation from her mother at the age of four to live with her step mother, the demise of her mother at the age of nine, her attainment of a university degree at an early age and constant commuting between Nigeria and Ghana.

However, the novel depicts, realistically, through the character of Esi the conflicting state of childhood as she questions scenes of sexual acts in innocence, like a male and female dog mating – her father in bed with 'Hotel Woman', she interrogates the hypocrisy of the adults she encounters and the seeming unfair treatment of the sexes even as early as nine years of age. These portend her strong character with a bit of activism enmeshed. It is important to note, though, as suggested by McCulloch (2019) that childhood is a contested and dynamic rather than a settled space and this flux is seen as Esi believes that frogs hopping after the rains can "jump on me and turn me into a man" (13) enunciating psychological realism of the genre, but as she grows older those thought begin to go into oblivion and are replaced with more mature feminist thoughts.

Standing asymmetrically to her step sisters, Esi, being, according to her father, "the only daughter left with a chance for greatness" (55), and cooked with intelligence begins a resistance to patriarchal oppression and expresses views that a woman has right to peaceful enjoyment of her body. Though, taken advantage of by a boy called Yaw, she loses her innocence out of sheer childishness and curiosity but maintains defiance as she questions the differences in treatment of the genders:

What have I done? If a boy did something bad to me, why is it my fault? ...I'd rather be a girl in my own skin, but I don't understand why women can be meanest to girls. And why is it that when Hotel Woman lies under papa, she makes him so happy, he thanks her, but I get called a tramp for wanting to do the same with Yaw? Why does Hotel Woman get rewarded with trips to Togo and new clothes while I get ginger and a cold floor?

The seeming injustice pushes her to go to the mud after rainfall and lay on the floor for frogs to turn her into a man but it never happens, hence she decides to assert her right to peaceful enjoyment of her body. As the story unfolds, we encounter an Esi who wants to understand and discover her sexuality but the question is to what extent is she willing to undertake this exploration.

At the outset, she is naively introduced to lesbianism at twelve years old in the boarding school system of Mmofraturu Girls' Boarding School in the form of 'supplies' which a senior girl and a junior girl will be lovers and do all sort of immoral acts. This exposes her to the sexuality of the feminine body. She narrates:

Now I put my mouth on Rose's nipple. Nothing comes out but it gets hard and she says yes, please, so I do it again. Her body is a marvellous playground for my fingers. There are hills and valleys and slides. My fingers play a racing game, over that curve, down the valley, in a tunnel, I win! Rose starts shaking. It's an earthquake inside her. She groans and moans until she is laughing and crying and stroking my hair... (122)

As she narrates a form of repulse is created in the mind as systems tend to automatically corrupt young and unsuspecting innocent children as a result of their quest for education. This singular queerness lays a foundation for a multiplicity of sexual inquisitions which, she loses lost control over. Esi begins to engage in masturbation uncontrollably both in class rooms and on her bed at Wesley Girls' High School. She discovers her body after having her first period and she says "my body is a source of life. Blood of life, not dirty blood! How alive everything is... I like me. Hello Esi, I'm happy so happy to know you!" (172). Maroula Joannou (2019) opines that there is a form of sexual honesty in the female characters of the bildungsroman genre. Esi acknowledges this innate need as she identifies the little Esi that lie below as a drooling infant to be pacified:

...so I pacify her with my finger. She like that and there's a hot itch that makes me move faster. The faster I move, the hotter and sweeter the itch that makes me move faster. The faster I move, the hotter and sweeter the itch and the harder I have to move, and then something painfully sweet is boiling and quaking so hard I'm groaning ... I must do it again at night, I must...(173)

Myriads of psychological intrusions and prodding characterize the feminist bildungsroman but in the case of Esi there is a fierce consciousness of sexual urges and fantasies which may seem extreme to a young child in the process of becoming. Though, the genre takes a spectrum of self-conscious journey, Adjakpon's focus on Ifeminism is highly erotic. Esi's imagination is predominantly sensual as she expresses that: "when I go to class I have nothing under my uniform, and when I sit on the wooden chair and shift around, little Esi's nose rubs against the chair and burns so sweetly...I can't help looking at the front of the male teacher's trouser and wishing I could see them naked (174). This is extreme and lustful but shamefully a realistic part of human nature.

Furthermore, integrating the journey motive into the female bildung, Esi is depicted as moving back and forth between Ghana and Nigeria and this accentuates at the same time adds colourations to her maturity without leaving out the sensual. She falls in love with Kayode who lives in the same compound as her maternal grandparents in Lagos, Nigeria. Kayode loves her genuinely and is willing to wait till her maturity before having sexual relations with her and when he eventually does, Adjakpon advances ifeminist stand points as she depicts Esi as enjoying, in full her body, with Kayode as "Days and nights, we feed each other. I luxuriate in the untamed rawness of our hunger, the way he grabs my hips and drives in. The innocence. It doesn't matter if I happen to be looking out the window, he can lift my dress from the back and let himself in" (264) which serves as a lasting bond between them and in Esi's opinion this is adjudged as true love. Kayode sexual prowess becomes the yardstick with which she measures other lovers subsequently.

However, the relationship is short-lived as her maternal family kicks against her intending marriage to Kayode, though initially she takes her stand but eventually gives in because the

journey towards maturation is not a clear-cut linear plot line but it is a state of constant flux contorted by feelings of flight or fight as the protagonist struggles with established forces already ingrained in the grand scheme of things. Maroula Joannou (2019) foregrounds Ellen Morgan's view of the female bildungsroman as an:

expression of movement from cultural conditioning into struggle with institutional forces, their progress towards the goal of full personhood, and the effort to reconstruct their lives and society according to their own vision of meaning and right living (215)

This struggle is highly conflicting as family relationships are usually lost or troubled. There are tensions and contradictions. Esi finally bows to pressure and ends the relationship with Kayode in a letter with the only reason being that "I love you very much but I can't lose my family" (271). This breakup affirms the conflict inherent in the psyche of the individual as she projects towards maturation.

Along comes Rudolph as Esi progresses in her journey. This relationship establishes several Ifeministic views where she attempts to assert her individuality by navigating issues like contraception, abortion, motherhood and marriage. In a review of ifeminism's conceptual propositions in Wendy McElroy's *Liberty for women*, Ashlie Warnick insists that "individual feminists advocates sexual freedom by calling for marriage reforms that ensured women's equality and free access to birth control information" (1605). Rudolph is the typical traditional African man who doesn't want to sacrifice his own pleasure to protect the vulnerability of the woman he claims to love. He refutes the idea of using a condom for protection against pregnancy but claims to be unprepared for fatherhood. After Esi's first abortion, she decides to visit a family planning clinic to get the IUD to be protected against unwanted pregnancies. But she has to fight against the hegemony of traditional women who do not share in her view:

To my surprise, the women waiting on wooden benches are either mothers cradling new-born babies on their laps or women with the round belly of someone about to birth a baby. There isn't a single young person in view. They throw me looks that say I'm tramp, a useless girl...children of today, no respect for tradition, no morals at all. I flee (301-302)

She loses the fight as she chickens out giving room for more abortions. As she evolves, even after her engagement with Rudolph, she realises his selfishness as he subjects her to abortions but Kayode is selfless and wears a rubber. Hence, though engaged for nearly seven months "this place doesn't feel like home" (362). Esi begins to question the feminist identity she had carved since her childhood. She heaves shame on herself "all your big talk. You challenge papa. You scorn Auntie. Yet look at what you've become, a person who can't stand up for herself and use contraceptives. (371). At this point Esi chooses to assert her individualism as she juxtaposes Rudolph as "two people in one, the one that feeds me and won't let me die of malaria, and the other that starves my sex and won't let me pregnancy, the one I want to leave" (373).

Suffice to say therefore, that Esi's decision to call off the engagement is hinged on Rudolph's inability to satisfy her sexually yet selfishly would not allow her to use contraceptives. She has been reduced to "a slab of meat on a butcher's table" (373). Hence she decides to reawaken her ifeministic consciousness as she declares:

When a farmer plants a seed, the soil has no right to refuse. Soil has no life. A woman does. She is not soil and no man may plant at will. No one may own another human being. I am the only one who should decide if I can take a pill or not. Anything done inside me is my choice alone. I am the queen of my body (399)

At this point, Esi realises that although she had fought against patriarchy in several ways, with Rudolph, she has been enabling him to do whatever he likes. The decision is “from now on I’ll take care of my own body” (400) and the evil engagement, “I’ll go against tradition and dissolve it myself” (401). This validates Summerfield’s and Downward’s (2010) opinion that the bildungsroman moves along a varied spectrum, a self-conscious journey of spatio-temporal development and maturation.

Extensively, the role of female friendship and solidarity has contributed generally to the becoming in the coming of age journey. Female friendship serves as a catalyst for personal growth and empowerment within the bildungsroman genre. The portraiture of a strong and supportive character like Sally challenges the perceived notion of female competition and reinforce the power of collective action. Sally contributes immensely to Esi’s emancipation from the shackles with which she held herself, the guilt that her refusal to leave Kayode is what killed Auntie Biggie, the death of her nephew and the like, are symbolic of societal norms and traditional values that wound around her. As she decides to break free Sally nudges her on with words like “Esi, you’re responsible for your own life. It’s your body. It’s your responsibility to protect it” (398). She gives Esi the support towards self-discovery and her eventual liberation. Esi heaves:

Every weight pressing me down has lifted. I am as unburdened as the day I slid out of my mother’s womb, before the world loaded on me. I am. Not the great I AM of the Bible, but one of rightful existence. I am. (401)

As Esi moves towards her individualism she reinforces what Rita Felski (1989) says about the feminist bildungsroman as a combination of “the exploration of subjectivity with a dimension of group solidarity which inspires activism and resistance rather than private resignation, and makes it possible to project a visionary hope of future change”. She begins to challenge what has been accepted as normalcy especially as upheld by her father whose only mantra is “a woman’s glory is her husband” irrespective of the crime committed against her, the woman is at fault. Her father slaps his wife at will but Esi begins to stand up against her father. She is of the opinion that:

At least Auntie never has to feel the sting of papa’s hand on her cheek again. Not when I’m around. Not since I told him he had no right to do that. Otherwise no revolution has touched home, except in me. Now I sit downstairs in the kitchen and gladly fan the coal pot for Auntie... If I help Auntie and Sister Mansa, it’s not because I accept my low position. It’s because we are the same. We grow breasts and have mouths between our legs that can bleed. I want them to know that I am with them (258)

Esi wants her sisters and her step mom to experience the kind of freedom she experiences after her decision to leave Rudolph. Sister Mansa writes to her about her husband’s maltreatment and emotional torture in Zimbabwe but her father blames her for his misconducts. This instils Esi to encourage Sister Mansa to separate from her husband so that she can get her freedom.

Rather than a private personal resignation, Esi pushes for group solidarity where everywoman can experience that future change. This is the extent to which Esi she intends to chase her freedom and accentuate her individuality. She wants to love and be loved rightly not feigned love. She decides to start all over. Setting herself free from the entanglements of Kayode and Rudolph with a fresh start at life yet unmarried.

At this juncture, it becomes necessary to infuse the expense at which individuality may be incurred in the growth process. There is often a significant price to pay for freedom hence, the place for morality, spirituality and purity. Ifeminists fight for freedom outside the work place and enthrone sexual freedom “leaving all spiritual matters to the conscience of the individual” (Ashlie Warnick, 1605). Wendy McElory (2003:1) also asserts that “individual feminism demands that all sexual choices, from motherhood to participating in pornography, be legally respected. The cost of such freedom is personal responsibility...” The expense of Esi’s freedom for peaceful enjoyment of her body, in all ramifications, is the dent on her morality. The curiosity, the quest, the lust to lay with a man and eat to her full had a price to pay. Firstly, this quest makes her feel dirty as she moves back and forth in sexual entanglements between Rudolph and Taiwo (Rudolph’s friend) and Kayode. This freedom doesn’t feel like the right thing to do hence the soul wrenching guilt. She narrates during her sexcapade with Taiwo:

I know it’s wrong and I want to stop but oh the way he drives into me. It’s been so long. Just this once, I say to myself, opening wide, heels planted on the bed...in the evening guilt dries me up...(368)

After the peaceful enjoyment of her body Esi is left with guilt the expense of her freedom is an unsettled conscience. The cost of freedom is a separation from the spiritual and what is man without the spiritual. Mcelory opines that modern feminism is critical of the Religious Right and of Christianity in general but this stance is considered a dangerous one. Esi recognises that masturbation is sin which she had to confess at the Celestial Melodies she asks God to “keep me from digging into little Esi’s throat to rub the ticklish itch that ends in sweet quacking. I cry and pray for forgiveness but I can’t control my sins” (176). It reinforces the existence of an inner police in man that resonates irrespective of the outward that yells for freedom, there is the conscience that distinguishes good from evil and brings to the fore the immorality inherent in the “sins of the body” (178).

Apart from the spiritual, there are physical consequences for bodily pleasure. Like the story within where a woman is made infertile as a result of repeated abortions. Her womb becomes “one big scar...no baby would take root in” (373). Herein lies the irony freedom but there is a price to pay but Esi theorizes the human nature when it comes to faith it is “ever shifting, ever transforming itself” (288).

4.0 CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, gendered discourses have become variegated in perspectives over the years birthing Ifeminism. The critical reading of *Of women and frogs* through the lens of bildungsroman and the aperture of Ifeminism, gives a vivid insight into the woman’s quest for freedom from the shackles of patriarchy and the grip of socio-cultural norms. Through this growth narrative, Adjakpon emphasizes bodily freedom for the woman and freedom to choose motherhood and family life as solely a function of the woman’s prerogative. Unlike the

previous generation of female African writers, Adjakpon presents Esi as a beam of hope for those women seeking for individualism in the face of cultural stereotypes. Subtly rather than overtly ‘tragicizing’, there is an infusion of the price to pay to attain such freedom. The guilty, the prodding eyes of matriarchs, the slut-shamming, the immorality.

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