

A Feminist study of Female Bildungsroman in Toni Cade Bambara's "The lesson"

Shokhan Rasool Ahmed¹

¹ English Department, College of Languages, University of Sulaimani, Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

Abstract:

Every literary text can be considered as effective cultural and historical evidence to show human experiences in different ages. Likewise, African American Literature becomes a major tool to portray racial segregation and marginalizing women of colour. African American novelists have allowed women of colour to have their voices heard and their identities found.

Toni Cade Bambara is among the best Afro-American authors who has displayed the difficulties that women of colour such as racism, sexism, racial discrimination, ethnic

segregation, gender inequality and loss of identity. This study principally analyzes Bambara's "The Lesson" by considering a Feminist Bildungsroman approach to deal with gender roles and gender inequality of the female characters.

This paper investigates some questions such as: how does "The Lesson" ascribe to the beliefs of the Black Power Movement? What types of dialects have been used in the text to picture the life and culture of African American women? How is Female Bildungsroman employed by Bambara to build and reconstruct a new image for the characters to enable them to fulfil their dreams? The current study delineates the oppression and segregation of African American people under a white-dominated society. However, the author attempts to deconstruct the life of the characters again so that they can have a better and healthy life.

Key Words: "The Lesson", Female Bildungsroman, Racial Discrimination, Ethnic Segregation and Loss of Identity.

Article Info:

DOI: [10.26750/Vol\(10\).No\(2\).Paper19](https://doi.org/10.26750/Vol(10).No(2).Paper19)

Received: 18-July-2022

Accepted: 16-Aug-2022

Published: 29-June-2023

Corresponding Author's E-mail:

shokhan.ahmed@univsul.edu.iq

This work is licensed under CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

Copyright©2023 Journal of University of Raparin.



Introduction:

Feminism and Female Bildungsroman

Feminism and Female Bildungsroman

Until the late 20th century, society dictated the roles of men and women, such as adolescence representing a rite of passage or the expectation that men are providers while women completed domestic duties. In literature, bildungsroman represents coming-of-age characteristics, where genders realize there is more they can accomplish than society has provided them (Benmorsi and Siouane, 2020, p. 1). Bildungsroman is a literary genre focusing on the moral and psychological growth of the protagonist, transforming them from youth to adulthood. Bildungsroman contains realization episodes and reflections resulting in maturity. The 19th century was characterized by reforms and progress, industrialization, innovation, and upheavals, eventually leading to the debate on women's role in the change. Women transformed from housewives to writers and utilized it to fight for a place in society. However, restrictions remained, such as the right to vote, hold political office, or have high ranks in employment. Feminism resulted from frustration and discrimination against women due to their unfair treatment in Society (Hyman, 2011, p. 210). Female bildungsroman was a literary result of feminism, describing women's physical and psychological changes to defy the roles society had awarded them. Similarly, in bildungsroman literature, the protagonist must undergo a challenging situation or experience that leads to moral maturity (Joannou, 2019, p. 206). The most common elements of female bildungsroman in literature are that the protagonist undertakes a psychological journey, faces a struggle for identity, experiences a societal conflict that bothers them, leaving them with a struggle to conform, and the loss of innocence that results in resolution.

Toni Bambara's "The Lesson" represents female bildungsroman, whereby the main character, Sylvia, an adolescent, undergoes mental and moral growth that changes her perspective on women's societal role. "The Lesson" is directly related to women's role in society. It is set in the 1970s after the black power movement when African Americans wanted economic empowerment and racial and gender equality (DiBernard, 1988, p. 2). Sylvia's neighbourhood was also similar to the women of color after the civil war who had just attained their freedom from slavery. However, the women had no access to education or money and were characterized by a narrow-mindedness that left them comfortable in their current state (Jones, 2018, p. 120). "The Lesson" applies the characteristics of female bildungsroman to demonstrate the changes that Sylvia, the protagonist, underwent, leading to moral and psychological maturity.

Analysis

“The Lesson” and the Black Power Movement

“The Lesson” ascribes to the Movement for Black Power in some scenes. First, the teacher decided to individually change the children’s mindsets by “taking responsibility to educate the young ones” (p. 116). This resembled the movement's strategy, which required people to become more self-sufficient and reclaim their lost racial identity. Secondly, the story resembles the movement’s inception, whereby Meredith, its founder, had been the only person of color with a university degree (Wakefield, 2014, n.p). In “The Lesson”, Miss Moore stands out from all the community members. She is more enlightened due to her education. Sylvia narrates that she hated the teacher and "her goddamn college degree." (p. 116). Thus, “The Lesson” has the qualities of the Black Power Movement because it entails showing society the racial inequalities existing between African Americans and whites, and Ms. Moore intends to change the former's mentality to help them become more self-sufficient and fight for equality.

Dialect Describing the Life and Culture of the African American Woman

In “The Lesson”, Sylvia speaks in African American Vernacular English. This is the most effective dialect for her because she is an adolescent living in the New York ghetto. The African American Vernacular English fits into Bambara's story because, when Sylvia uses it, she indicates that she is proud of her ethnicity, as she demonstrates in the story. She is proud of her family and her life, such that she hates Ms. Moor for saying "We all poor and live in the slums." (pp. 117). Secondly, the vernacular English demonstrates the inequality existing in society because it shows their distance from the white culture of quality education and a wealthier economy. At the store, Big Butt says he will buy the microscope and Rosie asks him "Whatcha gonna do with a microscope, fool?" (p. 117). “Whatcha” and “gonna” here are two informal words used in this conversation. When he says he will look at things and Ms. Moore asks what kinds of things, Big Butt has no clue. Thus, the dialect indicates a difference in culture between the blacks and the whites in New York. Bambara also uses vernacular English to demonstrate the confidence, creativity, feminism and toughness that the Blacks have in their experiences. These characteristics allow them to question their society and resist the pressure to behave like the culture that dominates them. Sylvia narrates by saying “White folks crazy” when she sees a lady in a fur coat on a hot day (p. 117), indicating that they realized the differences between their races.

The Use of Female Bildungsroman in “The Lesson”

One of the characteristics of the female bildungsroman is the moral change from naivety or sensitivity to maturity. The protagonist’s character progresses as they witness difficulties, and the story ends with their maturity. Initially, the author displays Sylvia as being proud, rude, sensitive, and strong-willed, whereby she is not willing to listen to anyone but herself. She describes everyone as “old and stupid, young and foolish” and claims that her cousin, Sugar, and she were the only ones who were “just right.” (p. 116). Sylvia's rudeness is demonstrated in how she describes Ms. Moore, saying, "I'm hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddam college degree" (p. 116). Sylvia’s pride and sensitivity are demonstrated when Ms. Moore regards the black community as poor. This is one of the societal conflicts that indicates female bildungsroman. Sylvia's community is contented with the poor state because they do not know there are opportunities for them to lead better lives. Sylvia narrates, "Then she gets to the part about we all poor and lives in the slums, to which I do not feature." (p. 117). Sylvia is too proud to admit that her family lives in poverty, and her sensitivity prepares her to reply to Ms. Moore about the issue. Still, it is interrupted when Ms. Moore steps out into the street. Sylvia also regards Ms. Moore's conversations as boring, mainly because she speaks of things Sylvia is not interested in. On page 117, Sylvia says, "and annoying us about the costs of things, our parents’ few earnings, the rent, and how funds are distributed unequally in the country." The beginning of the book shows Sylvia as naïve and oblivious, which has several similarities to feminism and female bildungsroman. Before women fought for their rights and roles in society, they were oblivious and satisfied with their state of life until societal changes compelled them to seek their identity. The changes included opportunities for them to be employed and earn income to allow them to contribute more to society. At the beginning of the book, the protagonist is unaware that this is a possibility.

Female bildungsroman entails the protagonist losing their innocence, which occurred to Sylvia when she visited the glamorous FAO Schwartz toy store on Fifth Avenue. Before the Civil War, black women were initially slaves and working in the fields, indicating their innocence. Sylvia’s innocence is demonstrated in her skepticism about accepting the education that Ms. Moore offers. Sylvia says she would rather “go to the pool or the show where it is cool” (p 116). Sylvia is also reluctant to go, and when Ms. Moore hires two cabs to take them there, Sylvia wants to "jump out at the next light" and run off to use the cab money that Ms. Moore has entrusted her with to "the first bar-b-que she can find.” (p. 117). This demonstrates Sylvia's innocence because she does not know the value of money. When women lost their husbands and income in the war, they lost their innocence and started running businesses and farms like men, leading them to want

more fulfilling societal roles. Similarly, Sylvia loses her innocence when she gets to the toy store and sees the price tags on the toys, leading her to learn that there is more money in society than she can access (Di Maio, 2020, n.p). When Sylvia sees the sailboat's price, \$1195, she thinks "that money could last forever." (p. 119). Looking at how much the cost of toys, Sylvia loses the innocence she had before, which leads her to deny her family's poverty. The toy store showed her how poor she was, leaving her angry. Sylvia also loses her innocence regarding hating people out of place due to her previous naivety. Just as female bildungsroman leads to a character undergoing challenging experiences, Sylvia felt out of place. Her situation related to the people she had initially mocked for being out of place. For example, at the story's beginning, Sylvia talks about Ms. Moore and says, "and quite naturally we laughed at her the way we did the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary." (P.116). Sylvia adds that "we kinda hated her too...she was black as hell." (p. 116). Sylvia's words showed that she laughed and mocked people who were out of place. Sylvia realized she was the one in a situation to be laughed at, leaving her feeling "funny, shame," and she "could not seem to get a hold of the door." (p. 119). Sylvia says that she has never been shy about "doing anything or going nowhere," but the loss of innocence regarding her poverty level altered her confidence.

As a common definition of female bildungsroman, one can notice that it is characterized by the protagonist's struggle for identity after a significant realization. Before Sylvia visited the toy store, she was confident and comfortable with her life. However, on the ride home, she could not stop thinking about the toy store, such that "her head hurt from too much thought." (p. 120). Sylvia struggles with her racial identity after spending the day in a part of town where people and the weather are different. This is similar to the women's roles after the civil war, whereby, after taking over men's roles, they were expected to return to their initial roles, which they were no longer comfortable with (Bakken and Buhaug, 2021, p. 989). When Sylvia first arrives at Fifth Avenue, she notices that everyone is dressed in stockings, and one woman, hot as it is, "is in a fur coat." (p. 117). Sylvia soon realizes that the side of town is different from the one she has been comfortable and contented with. This infuriates and confuses her. In her confusion, Sylvia, who never speaks to Ms. Moore, asks her, "Watcha bring us here for Miss Moore?" (p. 120). Sylvia wants to know why Ms. Moore introduced them to a world they did not know existed, where one toy's price was enough to sustain a black family of seven for twelve months. Sylvia's struggles are further indicated through her ride back home, where she "cannot stop thinking about this tricky toy I saw in the store." (p. 120). The toy cost \$35, and Sylvia imagined asking her mother for a present of the same price. She imagined what her mother would say, such as "thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy" or "the whole family could

visit granddaddy Nelson in the country.” (p. 120). Sylvia's experience at Fifth Avenue fueled her struggle for identity as she thought about the people who lived there. She wondered, "Who could spend so much money on sailboats and clowns? What are their occupations, and why don't we live like that?" (p. 120). Sylvia remembered Ms. Moore's words that poor people had to “awaken and demand their share of the pie,” and she realized she did not know the pie Ms. Moore had been referring to. This demonstrates Sylvia's struggle for identity because she was confident and proud in the morning; she returned from the toy store infuriated and ashamed, with many questions about a racial inequality she did not understand.

For female bildungsroman to begin and lead to growth in morality, the protagonist must have a role model who informs their direction. Ms. Moore, while she is not Sylvia's role model, becomes their teacher to guide them in the direction of change to improve their lives. Ms. Moore lived a unique life, showing the difference between Sylvia's unenlightened culture and the one she was supposed to live. Ms. Moore decided to change the children's mindsets individually by educating them about society's racial and economic inequality. Sylvia said that Ms. Moore was always “planning these boring-ass things for us to do.” (p. 116). Ms. Moore was educated and acknowledged that “it was only right she should take responsibility for the young ones' education.” (p. 116). This demonstrated Ms. Moore's desire to steer Sylvia and her friends in the right direction to help them identify racial inequality's challenges and work towards changing their lives. When they went on the trip, she observed their behavior to determine if they understood the lesson she was putting across; racial inequality. Ms. Moore is resilient because she uses all means possible to make the children learn. She asks enlightening questions such as Junebug's period to afford one toy and the lessons from the visit. She is contented with their responses because some understood the racial inequality issues she wanted to pass across (Wright, 2004, p. 12). Sugar said, "I do not think all of us here put together can eat what that sailboat costs in a year." Sugar adds that society "is not a democracy because there is no equal chance at happiness." (p. 120). Ms. Moore realizes Sylvia is angry and asks if anyone else learned anything that day, but Sylvia walks away. Ms. Moore was responsible for Sylvia's moral growth because she led her to realize that society was not what she thought. Ms. Moore's guidance is similar to the black power movement's strategy of the 1970s, which needed people to be more self-sufficient and reclaim their lost racial identity (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011, p. 1109). Ms. Moore helps Sylvia and the children discover the racial inequalities existing between African Americans and whites, intending to change their mentality to help them become more self-sufficient and fight for equality.

In female bildungsroman, the protagonist is left with a struggle to conform and resolve their lives, as was with Sylvia's case. In female bildungsroman, a character must realize that society is bigger than what they are used to and work towards achieving its best. Sylvia realizes that racial inequality exists in her society when she visits a region where everything is different from what she is used to. The whites in Fifth Avenue dress differently and have more money than her family could ever have. The anger that the realization causes her compels her to change her attitude and daily way of life. When she walks away from Ms. Moore and the other children, Sugar follows her and says, "Well, we got four dollars anyway." (p.121). Sugar says they could go to Hascombs and get chocolates, potato chips, and ice cream sodas as they do. Despite what Sugar learned from the toy store, she returns to normal life. However, Sylvia no longer wants to go to Hascombs. When Sugar goes ahead, Sylvia is okay with it because she is "going to think about the day's events." (p. 121). After witnessing the racial inequality, Sylvia decides she wants to be equal to the whites because she could not let anybody beat her.

In conclusion, Bambara accurately depicted female bildungsroman in "The Lesson" because she applies all of its characteristics in the short story. Bambara inculcated "The Lesson" with the role of women before and after the civil war. In female bildungsroman, the main character starts as naïve and experiences situations that lead to moral and psychological growth. "The Lesson" demonstrates Sylvia's growth from being proud of her culture to be ashamed of it, just as women's roles develop from taking care of children to running farms and businesses. Initially, Sylvia's innocence keeps her from seeing how poor her society is, and she is offended when Ms. Moore claims they live under dilapidated conditions. Female bildungsroman also promotes development through the loss of innocence. Sylvia loses her innocence when she experiences the racial inequality between her and the whites. She feels angry about a portion of society with more money, such that they spend on a toy more than her family could spend in a year. The female bildungsroman genre also gives the character a role model that propels them in the right direction. Sylvia's role model is Ms. Moore, who is more informed about racial inequality and its negative effects on society. Ms. Moore guides the children into witnessing and understanding racial inequality, which compels Sylvia to make a change. Female bildungsroman is characterized by the resolve to change one's life for the better, and Sylvia displays this characteristic. She no longer wants to continue with her activities before the toy store visit. Instead of running off with Sugar to buy chocolate and chips, she decides to go off alone and contemplate the day's revelations because she will not continue living below par when she could be equal to the whites.

خوێندنه‌وه‌یه‌کی فێمنستانه‌ی رۆمانی په‌روه‌رده‌یی مێینه‌ له‌ کورته‌ چیرۆکی "زه‌ لێسن" ی تۆنی که‌ید

بامباره‌

شۆخان رسول احمد

به‌شی زمانی ئینگلیزی، کۆلیژی زمان، زانکۆی سلێمانی، سلێمانی، هه‌ریمی کوردستان، عێراق.

پوخته‌:

ئه‌توانرێ هه‌موو ده‌قیکی ئه‌ده‌بی به‌ به‌لگه‌یه‌کی که‌لتوری و میژووی کاریگه‌ر دابنریت له‌ پێشاندانی ئه‌زمونه‌کانی مرۆڤایه‌تی له‌ قوناغه‌ جیاوازه‌کانی ژياندا. به‌هه‌مان شیوه‌، ئه‌ده‌بیاتی ئه‌فریقی ئه‌مریکی بووه‌ته‌ گه‌وره‌ترین سه‌رچاوه‌ له‌ ویناکردنی جیاکاری په‌گه‌زی و په‌راویزخستنی ژنانی ره‌شپێست. رۆماننوسه‌ به‌ رچه‌له‌ک ئه‌فریقی ئه‌مریکیه‌کان له‌ ده‌قه‌ ئه‌ده‌بیه‌کانیادا رینگه‌یان به‌ ژنانی ره‌شپێست داوه‌ ببنه‌ خاوه‌نی بیرورای خۆیان و ناسنامه‌ی خۆیان.

تۆنی که‌ید بامباره‌ یه‌کیه‌ له‌ هه‌ره‌ باشترین نوسه‌ری ئه‌فریقی ئه‌مریکیه‌کان له‌ ویناکردنی نه‌هامه‌تیه‌کانی ژنانی ره‌شپێست وه‌ک په‌گه‌زه‌په‌رستی، سیکسیزم، توندوتیژی په‌گه‌زی، جیاکاری نه‌ژادی و نایه‌کسانی جینده‌ری و له‌ده‌ستدانی ناسنامه‌. به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی سه‌ره‌کی ئه‌م توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ له‌ کورته‌ چیرۆکی "زه‌ لێسن" ی بامباره‌ ده‌کۆلیته‌وه‌ له‌رێی ئه‌پرۆچی فێمنستی بیلدنگزۆمان (رۆمانی په‌روه‌رده‌یی مێینه‌) له‌ به‌دواداچوونی کێشه‌کانی رۆلی جینده‌ر و نایه‌کسانی جینده‌ری کاره‌کته‌ره‌ مێینه‌کان.

ئه‌م توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ چه‌ند په‌رسیاریک تاووتوی ده‌کات وه‌ک: چۆن کورته‌ چیرۆکی "زه‌ لێسن" ده‌چیته‌هه‌مان قالی بیروبووچوونه‌کانی بزوتنه‌وه‌ی هیزی ره‌ش؟ چ جۆره‌ دایه‌لیکتیک له‌ کورته‌ چیرۆکه‌که‌ به‌کارهاتوه‌ له‌ ویناکردنی ژیان و که‌لتووری ژنانی ئه‌فریقیه‌ ئه‌مریکیه‌کان؟ بامباره‌ چۆن هه‌ولیداوه‌ رۆمانی په‌روه‌رده‌یی مێینه‌ به‌رجه‌سته‌ بکات له‌ بنیاتنان و دروستکردنه‌وه‌ی ژیانیکێ تازه‌ بۆ کاره‌کته‌ره‌کان و به‌ خه‌ونه‌کانیان بگه‌ن؟ ئه‌م توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ له‌ سه‌تمه‌کاری و جیاکاری خه‌لکی ئه‌فریقی ئه‌مریکیه‌کان ده‌کۆلیته‌وه‌ له‌ ژێر ده‌ستی کۆمه‌لگایه‌کی سپی بالاده‌ست. له‌ کاتیکدا نوسه‌ر هه‌ولده‌ات ژیانیکێ کاره‌کته‌ره‌کان به‌ جۆریکی تر بنیاتبنیته‌وه‌ بۆ ئه‌وه‌ی بتوانن ژیانیکێ خۆشته‌ر و ته‌ندروستریان هه‌بیت.

کلێله‌ ووشه‌کان: "زه‌ لێسن"، رۆمانی په‌روه‌رده‌یی مێینه‌، توندوتیژی په‌گه‌زه‌په‌رستی، جیاکاری نه‌ژادی و له‌ده‌ستچوونی ناسنامه‌.

Reference

Bakken, I.V. and Buhaug, H., 2021. Civil war and female empowerment. *Journal of conflict resolution*, 65(5), pp.982-1009. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0022002720983409>

Bambara, T. C. (1972). The lesson. *Gorilla, my love*, 85-96.
<https://opencuny.org/fall2014english150/files/2014/09/%E2%80%9CThe-Lesson%E2%80%9D-and-%E2%80%9CEveryday-Use%E2%80%9D.pdf>

Benmorsi, Z. and Siouane, A., 2020. The Female Bildungsroman. <http://bib.univ-oeb.dz:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/9339/1/memoire%20final%20benmorsi%20amel.pdf>

DiBernard, B., 1988. " I Work to Produce Stories That Save Our Lives"--Toni Cade Bambara. *Papers in Women's and Gender Studies*, p.2.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=womenstudiespapers>

Di Maio, C., 2020. New Kids on The Block: Children as Political Subjects in *Gorilla, My Love*. *Iperstoria*, (16). <https://iperstoria.it/article/download/923/910>

Hyman, L., 2011. Ending discrimination, legitimating debt: The political economy of race, gender, and credit access in the 1960s and 1970s. *Enterprise & society*, 12(1), pp.200-232.
<https://www.academia.edu/download/73145301/S1467222700009770.pdf>

Joannou, M., 2019. The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century. *A History of the Bildungsroman*, pp.200-216. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=v1N-DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA200&dq=female+bildungsroman&ots=DLCpkPy5Qf&sig=qzPE8ZHmAMfVJgI_cG6xETbt14A

Jones, C.A., 2018. Women, Gender, and the Boundaries of Reconstruction. *journal of the civil war era*, 8(1), pp.111-131. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26381505>

Reardon, S.F. and Bischoff, K., 2011. Income inequality and income segregation. *American journal of sociology*, 116(4), pp.1092-1153. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.1086/657114.pdf>

Wakefield, Z., 2014. Down to the crossroads: civil rights, black power, and the Meredith March. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17541328.2015.1049082>

Wright, K., 2004. Rise up hip hop nation: From deconstructing racial politics to building positive solutions. *Socialism and Democracy*, 18(2), pp.9-20.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08854300408428395>