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Disrupting the Journey: Gavin Weston's *Harmattan* as an Anti-Bildungsroman

Kesintiye Uğrayan Yolculuk: Bir Anti-Bildungsroman Olarak Gavin Weston'un *Harmattan* Eseri

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ABSTRACT
This article explores Gavin Weston's *Harmattan* as an anti-Bildungsroman, subverting the traditional coming-of-age narrative through its portrayal of the protagonist Haoua, a young girl in Niger whose development is stunted by external forces such as poverty, gender oppression, and socio-political instability. Unlike a conventional Bildungsroman, which traces the protagonist's psychological, social, and moral growth, *Harmattan* presents a fragmented and regressive narrative structure. Haoua's journey is marked by her inability to achieve personal growth, thwarted by socio-political conditions, oppressive societal norms, and familial obligations. The non-linear plot emphasizes the stagnation of Haoua's development, underscoring the trauma and disillusionment she faces. Key elements of the anti-Bildungsroman are highlighted through Haoua's denial of her educational opportunities, forced marriage, and the physical and emotional violence she endures. Her story concludes not with self-actualization but with personal and social disintegration, culminating in her imprisonment. Through this analysis, the article argues that *Harmattan* critiques the very possibility of personal fulfilment in the face of systemic oppression, making it a powerful example of anti-Bildungsroman in postcolonial African literature. Also, the article examines how the novel ultimately challenges the reader's expectations of character growth and societal integration, presenting a bleak and unresolved vision of identity and agency.

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Introduction

Originating from the German words "Bildung," meaning "education or formation," and "roman," standing for "novel," Bildungsroman refers to a literary genre that focuses on the psychological, moral, and social growth of the protagonists from youth to adulthood. In literary terms, the Bildungsroman, more commonly referred to as a "novel of formation" or "coming-of-age novel," dates back to the 18th century, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's work *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, written between 1795 and 1796, is regarded as the first and a seminal example of Bildungsroman in literature. In line with the spirit of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the Bildungsroman is a genre that allows the protagonists to express their own world view, reflects the development of their subjective personality, enables the formation of a personal perspective, and

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even permits an expression of individual values in contrast to stereotypical societal viewpoints (Golban, 2017, pp. 112-113). Emphasizing the individual and individuality, the Bildungsroman focuses on the emotional, psychological, and spiritual insight of the protagonist as an individual. Additionally, it highlights the possibility of the character's undergoing a transformation, gaining a new identity, achieving self-completion, and experiencing a complete metamorphosis, all of which ultimately bring protagonists to maturity.

Although there are many different and diverse definitions of the Bildungsroman, Karl Morgenstern, who first used the term as a concept in the early 19th century, defined this genre as follows: "it portrays the Bildung of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness" (Morgenstern, 1819, as cited in Swales, 1978, p. 12). Based on Morgenstern's definition, it is possible to say that the fundamental requirement of the Bildungsroman is character transformation and identity formation. The protagonist, who embarks on a type of journey, experiences ups and downs along the way. However, every experience the hero undergoes is of critical importance for his development and transformation, or in Bakhtin's term, his "becoming" – allowing him to reach a higher stage (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 19). In this regard, the definition provided by Wilhelm Dilthey, which is based on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, serves as one of the paradigm-setting descriptions of the Bildungsroman:

> A regulated development within the life of the individual is observed, each of its stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony. (Dilthey, 1913, as cited in Swales, 1978, p. 3)

Based on Dilthey's definition, which "has acquired almost canonical status within German literary history" (Swales, 1978, p. 3), it can be argued that the Bildungsroman centres on the protagonist's journey and personal history, both of which are filled with challenges and crises. One of the characteristic features of the Bildungsroman is that, despite all the challenges, protagonists in the Bildungsroman come to terms and reaches reconciliation both with their own identity and with society and social expectations by the end of this journey (Gehrmann & Schönwetter, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, the Bildungsroman heroes ultimately mature by not only overcoming all the crises they encounter but also drawing the necessary constructive conclusions from them.

Originating primarily in German literature, thus having European roots, the Bildungsroman has not only undergone changes within historical periods but has also shown variations in cultural contexts. In other words, the Bildungsroman has gone through "radical changes in human society and writers who use the form in different socio-political eras and geographical spaces, modify the Bildungsroman so as to draw attention to specific experiences of a particular culture and historical period" (Addei, Osei, & Ennin, 2021, p. 77). As a reflection of this, the Bildungsroman has found unique expressions in African literature as it often intertwines with the continent's historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts. Unlike the traditional European Bildungsroman, which primarily focuses on the individual's journey toward self-actualization within a relatively stable society, the African Bildungsroman is frequently set against a backdrop of colonialism and post-colonialism. This genre in African literature does not merely narrate the personal growth of its protagonists but also reflects the collective experiences of their communities, grappling with the aftermath of colonial exploitation, the quest for identity, and the clash between traditional values and modernity. As such, the African Bildungsroman becomes a site of resistance and reclamation, offering nuanced explorations of how young African characters navigate the complexities of identity, power, and belonging in societies marked by profound change. These narratives often conclude not with the protagonist's full integration into society, as is common in the classic Bildungsroman, but rather with an ambivalent or open-ended resolution that reflects the ongoing challenges of defining selfhood within a postcolonial context. Therefore, in the African novel,

protagonists who struggle to grow, establish their identity, and complete their personal development in unstable societies may fail and thus transform into anti-Bildungsroman heroes.

Gavin Weston is a British "visual artist and writer" (Weston, 2012, p. 574) whose works span multiple creative fields, including literature, photography, and charity work. Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Weston has drawn much of his artistic and literary inspiration from his extensive travels and experiences in different cultures, particularly in West Africa. In addition to his literary works, Weston is also involved in humanitarian efforts, particularly in advocating for the rights and welfare of children in Africa. Weston's novel *Harmattan*, which "is based on first-hand experiences of Niger and its people" (Weston, 2012, p. 574) is a striking example of this, as it explores the harrowing realities faced by a young girl, called Haoua, in Niger. The novel, which was published in 2012, is set against the backdrop of the Sahel region's severe socio-political issues, including poverty, forced marriage, and legacies of colonialism. The novel is a powerful critique of the societal structures that trap individuals in cycles of suffering, and it reflects Weston's deep concern with human rights and social justice. More specifically, in *Harmattan*, Weston tells the story of an eight-year-old girl Hauoa, who has dreams for the future and fights to achieve them but experiences a devastating journey which ultimately shatters her dreams. Therefore, the aim of this article is to investigate *Harmattan* as an anti-Bildungsroman with respect to its portrayal of Haoua since the novel subverts the traditional coming-of-age narrative by highlighting the protagonist's stagnation rather than growth, disillusionment, fragmentation, and the absence of a positive resolution.

Hauoa as a Disjointed Victim

The elements of anti-Bildungsroman in *Harmattan* are evident through its non-linear plot, lack of personal growth, denial of agency, and the overwhelming presence of external forces that thwart any attempt at self-realization. One of the most striking elements of *Harmattan* as an anti-Bildungsroman is its non-linear plot structure which becomes evident from the very beginning of the novel. Unlike the classic Bildungsroman, which follows a clear, mostly -though not always- chronological trajectory that mirrors the protagonist's personal growth, *Harmattan*, which can be claimed to be "a story told in reverse" (Ever, 2017, p. 396), unfolds in a fragmented, disjointed manner. The narrative jumps between past and present, presenting key moments in Haoua's life out of sequence. The section that is actually the novel's first chapter, but is titled as a "Prologue," begins with "Niamey, January 2000" (Weston, 2012, p. 9) and ends with "That was before my twelfth birthday" (Weston, 2012, p. 12). As can be understood from this, Haoua is in Niamey, the capital of Niger, and it is evident that she has passed the age of twelve, which conveys a sense of being a pivotal period in her life. However, in the first chapter following the prologue, the narrative shifts back to April 10, 1995, and the setting moves to Wadata, a remote village of Niamey where Haoua lives with her family. On this, Ever claims that anti-Bildungsromans' "regressive plot has often been contrasted to the progressive narrative of the classical Bildungsroman" (Ever, 2017, p. 397). From this perspective, it can be claimed that flashbacks in an anti-Bildungsroman serve to disrupt traditional narratives of growth and development by revealing past traumas or failures that inform the protagonist's present state. They emphasize stagnation rather than progression, highlighting how past experiences shape a character's disillusionment or sense of loss. This is also applicable to Haoua as she goes back and forth between her life before and after her twelfth birthday. While referring to her life now, she speaks of "little landscapes" her "tears have made" (Weston, 2012, p. 9) that can be interpreted as an outcome of her past traumas which forms or more precisely deforms her current state. Additionally, Haoua's physical condition which is described as "I rock backwards, forwards backwards, forwards" also serves as an expression of the instability in which she finds herself (Weston, 2012, p. 9). The disappointments and feelings of loss stemming from the fragmentation and disillusionment Haoua has endured arise through flashbacks. Thus, this use of non-linear storytelling challenges the reader's expectations of character evolution, underscoring

themes of existential crisis and the complexity of personal identity. Ultimately, flashbacks deepen the sense of a life lived in contradiction to typical notions of maturation which is also true for Haoua.

Additionally, as indicated by the dates in Haoua's correspondence with her Irish sponsor family, there are significant gaps in her life story that could be considered major omissions. For instance, while the second letter she writes is dated "3rd July, 1996" (Weston, 2012, p. 18), the third letter is not written until "21st June, 1998" (Weston, 2012, p. 21). These temporal discontinuities highlight how Haoua's journey towards adulthood, unlike a traditional Bildungsroman, is marked by insecurity and instability. In other words, this narrative style reflects the unpredictable and often chaotic nature of Haoua's world, where any semblance of a linear, progressive path to adulthood is thwarted. Besides, by destabilizing time and sequence, Weston emphasizes the discontinuities in Haoua's development, rejecting the idea that her life can be understood as a coherent, upward journey toward maturity. Instead, her story is one of fragmentation, reflecting how various external forces – such as gender-based violence, poverty, and socio-political instability – consistently undermine her potential for growth.

Another element that firmly situates *Harmattan* within the anti-Bildungsroman genre is the absence of personal growth or self-realization in the protagonist's journey. In a traditional coming-of-age novel, the protagonist's evolution is marked by increasing self-awareness and the development of a clear identity. However, Haoua's experiences are defined not by growth but by regression and loss. Her life is marked by the gradual stripping away of her childhood innocence, security, and future possibilities. Throughout the beginning chapters of the novel, Weston portrays Haoua as a "very happy" (Weston, 2012, p. 13) girl living in a traditional Muslim Nigerian family with her siblings Fatima and Adamou, her elder brother Abdelkrim who is a soldier, her mother Azara and her father Salim. Supported by the Boyd family from Northern Ireland through the Vision Corps International (VCI) which is a branch of Tera Area Development Programme, Haoua is able to continue her education at a local primary school. Despite the burdensome and strenuous traditional roles imposed on girls in Wadata, such as "pounding millet, washing clothes, fetching water from the river, herding animals, cooking, gathering firewood, and tilling the dry ground" (Weston, 2012, p. 15) which prevent girls from going school and receiving education, Haoua, as a promising student, dreams of transcending these roles through education and aspires to become a teacher and "see more of the world" (Weston, 2012, p. 19). Her life, however, is turned upside down after the day Haoua finds her mother "lying, face down in a mess of millet and sand" (Weston, 2012, p. 97). Azara is first taken to a dispensary in Wadata and then sent to Niamey due to AIDS, a disease that Haoua describes as "a very bad thing" and "it brings great shame on a family" (Weston, 2012, p. 107). As a result of living in a traditional society and being the only daughter in the household, Haoua is forced to "be the woman of the house" during her mother's stay in hospital (Weston, 2012, p. 110). This transition from a schoolgirl to the woman of a house not only means an increase in household duties and responsibilities for Haoua, but it also signifies her being pulled away from formal education, which is the fundamental key to her development and maturation. Although she manages to complete her schoolwork in the first few days after her mother leaves by waking up earlier and staying up later, the arrival of Alassane (who is, in fact, a prospective wife for Haoua's father) makes Haoua's dreams shattered as she sternly declares that "your father sent me over to tell you that you must help your brother tend to the livestock and crops today," a process which will certainly end up Haoua's formal education (Weston, 2012, p. 111). Despite Haoua's insistence on continuing her education, Alassane's response becomes fierce and Haoua becomes the victim of physical violence which is described by Haoua as "one hand clenched my jaw while she jabbed me in the ribs with the other" (Weston, 2012, p. 112).

Not only Alassane, but also Haoua's father, Salim, is a key factor in obstructing his daughter's education. Helpless in the face of Alassane, Haoua insists to her father by saying "I have to go to

school, Father. It is what Mother wants for me too" (Weston, 2012, p. 118). However, the outcome is hardly different as Salim first grips Haoua's wrist tightly, grasps "her shoulders in his big strong hands," (Weston, 2012, p. 118) and then raises "his right hand to strike" her (Weston, 2012, p. 119) (although he refrains from completing the act due to Adamou's intervention). Nonetheless, his actions lead to the abrupt halt of Haoua's formal education – arguably her greatest opportunity to realize her potential. As a result, there comes out a "confrontation between collective tradition and the modern, individualistic career of the protagonist" (Austen, 2015, p. 217) whereby Haoua is pushed to fall in line with the conventional expectations of the society and her schooling is forced to come to an end. Therefore, it can be claimed that forcing a character to end her formal education becomes a significant element of the anti-Bildungsroman mainly because it disrupts the conventional trajectory of personal growth and self-realization which education typically provides in a traditional Bildungsroman. Education is often portrayed as a key avenue for characters to achieve intellectual development, social integration, and autonomy. Hence, in contrast to traditional Bildungsroman which "should deal with an individual's life focusing on his or her formative youth" (Austen, 2015, p. 215), the abrupt termination of Haoua's formal education symbolizes the barriers to her personal advancement imposed by societal or familial forces. This limitation stifles Haoua's potential, trapping her in a state of "arrested development" (Esty, 2012, p. 22) where growth is neither possible nor valued. Instead of gaining knowledge and empowerment, her journey starts to be marked by frustration and stagnation, highlighting the anti-Bildungsroman's emphasis on thwarted growth and the inability to achieve fulfilment.

In the genre of Bildungsroman, the mentor plays a crucial role in guiding the protagonist's personal and intellectual growth, often acting as a catalyst for self-discovery and development. Traditionally, the mentor is an older, wiser figure who provides advice, support, and sometimes challenges that help the young protagonist navigate the complexities of life. In the book *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, the role of the mentor and mentorship is highlighted as follows:

> Being a novel of education, the Bildungsroman needs not only an impressionable or receptive young person as pupil and central figure but also a teacher or mentor, who in the neo-Platonic tradition functions to initiate the neophyte into secret and sublime mysteries. (Glattery, 1991, p. 317)

As can be understood from the quotation, the essential dynamic between the mentor and the protagonist in a Bildungsroman should be underscored by emphasizing the mentor's role as a guide who facilitates the protagonist's intellectual and moral development. Also, the reference to the neo-Platonic tradition highlights how the mentor introduces the young character to deeper, often transformative knowledge, aligning the journey of personal growth with philosophical enlightenment. In this context, the mentor is not merely an instructor but a catalyst for the protagonist's transition from ignorance to understanding, guiding them through both external experiences and internal revelations. Similarly, when discussing the term Bildung in African literature, Austen not only emphasizes that the protagonist has "a relationship to personal mentors" but also underlines the support mentors provide for the character's education – whether formal or informal (Austen, 2015, p. 216). In *Harmattan*, it can be claimed that Haoua has more than one mentor. Foremost among them is her teacher, Monsieur Boubacar who is "a wonderful man" (Weston, 2012, p. 128). During the time Haoua is able to continue her education, the role of Monsieur Boubacar is highlighted by Haoua who says Monsieur Babacar was "never far away if I got stuck with either reading or writing" (Weston, 2012, p. 20). However, as a mentor, his role is not confined to the school and he does not remain silent when Haoua's education is interrupted. In an attempt to rectify the situation, he visits Haoua's home and indicates: "I am very concerned that one of my students might fall behind with her work, so I thought that perhaps we could work out some kind of plan whereby you might keep up your studies at home – until things return normal" (Weston,

2012, p. 128).

As can be inferred from Monsieur Boubacar's statement, when "formal and institutionalized education" is not feasible, pursuing individual studies and "independent reading" can be seen as a prudent solution to ensure protagonists' continued educational development and growth as it is the case with Haoua (Austen, 2015, p. 216). Monsieur Boubacar, who "cared enough to come to" (Weston, 2012, p. 128) Haoua's house, attempts to persuade Salim to send her daughter back to school by both highlighting the significance of Haoua's education and underlining Haoua's excellence as a student:

> Your daughter is a bright student. She has learned a great deal over the last few years and continuous to make good progress in her studies. I have high hopes for such a promising girl. … Salim, your daughter's education is very important. You must not take it away from her now, please. With an education she can help to make things better. She could be a doctor or a teacher or a great writer, or an interpreter like Monsieur Richard. (Weston, 2012, p. 129)

While this moment fills Haoua "with a great surge of hope and happiness" (Weston, 2012, p. 128), Salim's coarse and uncompromising attitude, conveyed by his command to "get away from my home" (Weston, 2012, p. 131) signals to Haoua that her opportunities for both formal and informal education have been extinguished. Expressing her deep disillusionment, Haoua says, "A cold chill ran down my spine. 'No! No!' I whispered" (Weston, 2012, p. 130). In this moment, she not only loses the hope of continuing her education but also the extraordinary teacher and mentor who has been guiding her. The relationship between her teacher and Haoua could have offered the protagonist a chance to gain insights into the world thanks to education and the possibility of personal maturation. These elements could have ultimately helped her grow and integrate into society. However, her identity – as well as her chances for growth and integration – is shattered due to her father's behaviour which also damages the relationship between the pupil and the mentor.

At the heart of the Bildungsroman lies the journey of self-discovery. The protagonist embarks on a journey – both literal and metaphorical – that leads to a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. This journey is not merely physical; it is an inward exploration that requires the protagonist to confront their desires, fears and limitations. Discussing the role of journeys in Bildungsroman, Golban explains:

> This hero's journey corresponds to a process of individual development from a disjointed sense of identity to a consolidated identity, when the individual acquires a clear sense of aspiration in life. In other words, the monomyth reveals human experience, in particular the process of maturation of an individual, the reaching and acknowledgment of the adult self. (Golban, 2014, p. 34)

As Golban puts forward, the hero's journey symbolizes a process of personal growth, where an individual moves from a fragmented sense of self to a unified, mature identity. Through this journey, the individuals gain clarity about their purpose and aspirations in life, ultimately reaching and recognizing their adult self. This transformation reflects the universal experience of maturation and self-discovery. In *Harmattan*, much like traditional Bildungsroman protagonists, Haoua embarks on a journey. However, this journey is far from one that matures, unifies, or shapes her identity into a coherent whole. Before she can even recover from the devastation caused by her mother's illness and the emotional distance created by their separation, Haoua faces another setback, the interruption of her education, which forces her to focus on reuniting with her mother and seeking her support, a case which is only possible by a journey from Wadata to Niamey. Nevertheless, Salim deems such a journey as "too dangerous, too far, too expensive" (Weston, 2012, p. 156) and refuses to permit the trip. Ultimately, Haoua sacrifices her shoes, a gift from her sponsor family from Ireland, in exchange for travel money, and Salim's cousin Moussa, who lives in Niamey, agrees to

accompany her on the journey to the city which makes Haoua's journey possible. However, a few days before Haoua's journey begins, she experiences her first menstrual cycle, which often symbolizes key moments of growth and transformation. The onset of a menstrual cycle holds particular symbolic weight in the context of a female protagonist's journey as it can mark a crucial transition from childhood to adulthood, often signifying a deeper understanding of identity, sexuality, and societal expectations. As such, Moussa's comment on seeing Haoua, "Ah, so you're a real woman now" and "it just means that you're ready" (Weston, 2012, p. 161) signifies the societal expectations, namely marriage. In addition, before starting the journey, Haoua expresses her hesitation or discomfort with the idea of having to travel with two men by saying "Suddenly, it struck me that I was about to set off on the first stage of a long journey with two men whom I barely know" (Weston, 2012, p. 180). Considering all of this, it becomes clear that Haoua is on the verge of a difficult and arduous journey, which also triggers feelings of anxiety and hesitation in her from the very beginning.

Throughout the journey, Haoua has to cope with various difficulties. Despite the physical discomforts she has to endure on camels just behind a man, what Haoua finds most troubling is Moussa's attitude and behaviours. The constant feeling of being under Moussa's watchful eye, "it seemed like I could feel his eyes boring into me" (Weston, 2012, p. 183), makes Haoua feel excessively disturbed. In addition, Moussa's inappropriate behaviour causes Haoua to feel both frightened and increasingly anxious. Specifically, his act of urinating without any restraint and in a way that suggests sexual undertones deeply unsettles Haoua which she expresses as follows:

> On one occasion I was distracted from preparing our refreshment by the sound of splashing. I looked up to see Moussa urinating, not far from where I was kneeling. He had been squatting, in the acceptable fashion, with his jellabe and thighs affording him some privacy, but when he caught my eye, he stood up, quickly, and shook himself towards me. (Weston, 2012, p. 183)

In a Bildungsroman, overcoming such difficulties plays a central role in the protagonist's personal growth and development. The challenges protagonists face – whether emotional, social, or physical – are often key factors for self-discovery and maturity. These struggles not only shape their identity but also help them gain a deeper understanding of the world and their place within it. The journey through adversity reflects the broader theme of transformation, illustrating how resilience and perseverance are essential for achieving a more complete sense of self. Therefore, Haoua's ability to deal with such challenges, to protect herself, and ultimately to reach her main goal of reaching Niamey can be considered in line with the traditional Bildungsroman trajectory. However, the real challenge that profoundly affects Haoua and causes significant regression in her identity and journey awaits her at the hospital in Niamey, where her mother is staying. When she and her brother Abdelkrim arrive at the hospital and see the empty bed where their mother is supposed to be, it wreaks havoc on Haoua. Understanding this, Haoua says "this is how things looked just before my life changed forever: the scene that I relieve, like a dream, every day of my life" (Weston, 2012, p. 224). Soon after, they learn from the doctor that Azara "a very ill woman passed away early this morning" (Weston, 2012, p. 225), and Haoua's world begins to completely turn upside down. Hence, the loss of a significant person can symbolize the disruption or complete thwarting of the protagonist's personal development. Unlike in a traditional Bildungsroman, where such loss might lead to growth, maturity, or self-actualization, in *Harmattan*, it intensifies feelings of disillusionment, stagnation, or regression. The absence of a guiding figure or source of emotional support deepens Haoua's sense of alienation, reinforcing themes of failure, fragmented identity, or an inability to reconcile with society. Therefore, Haoua's journey which lasts "for just two days" (Weston,2012, p. 309) ends in a loss that highlights the exploration of unresolved or diminished potential of Haoua.

In an anti-Bildungsroman, the protagonist's development may be stunted or regresses due to

external circumstances that prevent traditional self-actualization. Child marriage serves as one such destructive force, as it often removes girls from education, social opportunities, and the time needed for psychological growth. These stories might depict characters trapped in domestic roles, where any semblance of personal aspiration or individual fulfilment is either postponed indefinitely or permanently denied. Instead of moving toward self-knowledge and independence, these protagonists are often forced into a life of submission, domesticity, and passivity, making their story arcs inherently tragic or incomplete, defying the optimistic arc of a traditional coming-of-age story. Similarly, in *Harmattan*, Haoua, who lost both her mother, who was her mentor and protector, and her brother Abdelkrim, who died in an internal conflict, finds herself helpless in the hands of her father, Salim, who is deeply attached to traditional societal norms and gender roles. Under the pressure of her father and with the approval of the elders of the society, she is forcibly married to Moussa, a man much older than her and already with two wives. Whenever Haoua, who "was married just days after her twelfth birthday" (Weston, 2012, p. 320) expresses her fears about this marriage, her father, relying on societal codes, defends it with the following reasoning:

> Do not question my judgement. Already I see these young boys looking at you. I will not have you falling into ... adventures and gaining a reputation. If that happens, no one will want you and I will have failed to fulfil my duties as a father. Cousin Moussa is a fine man with a good business. ... And you will obey him as your husband, just as you obey God. (Weston, 2012, p. 321)

The strict hierarchical structure of traditional families, as evident in Haoua's case, often places characters in positions of obedience to authority figures such as parents or community leaders. This emphasis on submission over individual choice suppresses the Bildungsroman's ideal of personal agency and transformation. In the anti-Bildungsroman, instead of achieving growth through self-assertion and independence, characters may internalize their lack of agency, perpetuating a cycle of passivity. Therefore, from the moment Haoua is forced into marriage at a young age, her personal development is derailed, and the possibility of achieving a sense of autonomy or self-determination becomes increasingly distant. Rather than growing into a fully realized individual, Haoua, expressing her despair by saying "this is what it must be like for the animals at the zoo in Niamey" (Weston, 2012, p. 327) is pushed into a premature adulthood that denies her the opportunity to explore her own identity.

At the end of a traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonist typically reaches a point of maturity, self-awareness, and integration into society after having undergone a journey of personal growth. The narrative arc usually leads to the character achieving a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world, often resolving the inner conflicts or external challenges they faced throughout the story. This culmination signifies the completion of their coming-of-age process, where they reconcile their individual desires with societal expectations, and are now ready to take on adult responsibilities. However, it is completely different in an anti-Bildungsroman where the protagonists' journey may end in despair, cynicism, or resignation, reflecting an unresolved struggle with societal pressures or personal limitations. Rather than achieving harmony, the protagonist often faces fragmentation, loss of hope, or continued oppression, especially in contexts where external forces such as poverty, gender, class, or historical trauma play significant roles. In line with this, Haoua, who says "behind me, my hacked-off life: fading fragmenting, like a recent dream" (Weston, 2012, p. 329), is forcibly married without being allowed to complete her development, torn from her home, and taken to Moussa's house in Niamey. There, Haoua is raped by Moussa and she expresses the torture she is subjected to by saying "Not the first beating I have endured since coming here three months ago. And certainly not the last" (Weston, 2012, p. 331). Although Haoua speaks about her dreams by saying "I had hoped to read many books. I had hoped to travel to the places he [Monsieur Boubacar] showed me on his maps" (Weston, 2012, p. 336), her dreams and

potential never come true. What is more tragic is revealed in the epilogue of the book. In her letter to Mademoiselle Sushi requesting news about her siblings, Fatima and Adamou, Haoua reveals that she has been confined in a prison for the past eight months. She explained what happened as follows:

> As you may have heard, Mademoiselle, they say that I murdered my husband. What I tell you now is the truth as I remember it, as God is my witness. I can remember deep despair, that this man hurt me badly, and it is true that on the evening of his death I had witnessed him slaughtering a beast to celebrate Eid al-Adha and so I would have known exactly where to find the knife and how to use it. But as to actually cutting my husband's throat, I have no recollection of this whatsoever. (Weston, 2012, p. 368)

As a consequence of being unable to bear the disappointments, unfulfilled dreams, and violence she constantly suffered from, she killed Moussa by slitting his throat and was subsequently imprisoned. As a result, Haoua, who had the potential to become "a doctor or a teacher, or a great writer" (Weston, 2012, p. 336) turns into a child victim who could not realize her potential due to familial or societal norms and pressures. The novel ends with a letter from Mr. Noel Boyd to Vision Corps International. The Boyd family – who, under normal circumstances, is expected to support Haoua throughout her education and did so until the day she was withdrawn from school – either decides to support a new student or is compelled to make this decision. VCI explains the reason for this situation by stating, "Unfortunately the girls who marry cannot continue their education because a girl at school is not allowed to get married; therefore reluctantly we have to release them from the project" (Weston, 2012, p. 378). Ultimately, Haoua is abandoned to imprisonment by her own society, which hinders her personal development and denies her the possibility of becoming a fully realized self. Also, she is no longer supported by the international organization that once backed her, and thus she becomes a lost soul since "negative/positive experiences do not carry her to an ideal point" (Özdemir, 2018, p. 498). As such, Harmattan, as a novel not of formation but of deformation, critiques the very possibility of Haoua's personal growth, highlighting her inability to achieve personal growth, fulfilment and harmony in a world marked by systemic oppression, marginalization, or existential uncertainty.

Socio-political Conditions Shattering Bildung in Postcolonial Societies

One of the most significant factors behind Haoua's transformation into an anti-Bildungsroman character is the socio-political conditions she is subjected to. Many African countries began to gain independence from colonial powers around the mid-20th century. However, a large number of these newly independent nations failed to establish stable structures. Consequently, civil wars, coups, assassinations, and the resulting instability and chaos led these countries to remain dependent on external powers in various sectors, including healthcare, education, and agriculture. In addition, the inability to form stable governments has made internal security a major issue in these nations. While the Bildungsroman typically traces a young protagonist's journey toward self-realization, independence, and social integration, Weston in *Harmattan* subverts these expectations by portraying the life of Haoua whose trajectory is marred also by unstable socio-political conditions. In other words, Weston's novel offers a pointed critique of the traditional Bildungsroman by depicting Haoua as a protagonist whose development is not only interrupted but actively dismantled by the harsh realities of her socio-political environment. In this context, the novel's title holds thematic significance, as *Harmattan* refers to "a dry dusty wind that blows from the Sahara across West Africa" (Weston, 2012, p. 1), and this storm brings nothing but destruction not only into Haoua's life but also into Niger as a postcolonial society. From this perspective, it can be claimed that political instability in Africa and other postcolonial societies often hinders the potential growth of characters in literary works, particularly in the anti-Bildungsroman. The bildungsroman traditionally follows the protagonist's development through self-discovery,

education, and eventual social integration, but in settings of political turmoil, these trajectories are disrupted. Political instability destabilizes social institutions, from education to family structures, limiting characters' opportunities to evolve in line with societal expectations. As a result, characters frequently find themselves in circumstances where personal growth is stunted or rendered impossible, underscoring the limitations imposed by larger socio-political forces. This reflects the breakdown of the ideal Bildungsroman structure, replacing it with the anti-bildungsroman form where the narrative arc resists linear progression and closure.

Harmattan is set in Niger between 1995 and 2001. Since gaining its independence from France in 1960, Niger has experienced a highly tumultuous political history including the establishment of several republics as well as intermittent military regimes. Considering that the novel begins in 1995, the National Conference, which was held in 1991, and its resulting outcomes are crucial for understanding the chaos within Niger. First and foremost the National Conference "ushered in the multi-party system in Niger" and "explicitly rejected Tuareg separatist claims" (Bekoe, 2012, p. 3). Besides, the conference also resulted in the forced resignation of the then-president, Saibo. Although the move toward a multi-party system appeared to be a positive step, the National Conference failed to bring the stability that Niger had hoped for. The primary reason for this was the rejection of the separatist demands of the Tuaregs, which Haoua define as one of "the tribes of my country" (Weston, 2012, p. 38), and this rejection ultimately led to the first Tuareg rebellion, lasting until 1995. The Tuaregs, having formed militias and engaged in armed conflict, plunged Niger into internal unrest. Furthermore, the military regime led by President Ibrahim Bare Mainassara, who was elected in 1996, faced intense criticism, particularly due to its economic policies, further worsening the country's situation. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that Haoua was affected by the chaos in her country, which was largely due to political and economic instability. Niger's economic dependence on international aid organizations such as Vision Corps International (VCI), Tera Area Development (TAD), and Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE) not only hindered the country's growth but also made the Nigerien people dependent on external aid for various sectors, including education and healthcare. In this regard, Haoua's education, which was supported by the Boyd family from Ireland through VCI, CARE's efforts to address healthcare issues, and TAD's seed support programs in agriculture all illustrate Niger's – and consequently Haoua's – reliance on external aid for development. As a consequence of not being independent, Haoua is firstly taken out of school to support her family, tend to their only source of livelihood, the animals, and do household chores. What can be seen as a worse result of the economic problems in Niger is that Haoua is forced to marry Moussa, who is much older than her, just because he is wealthy, which causes an indefinite recession in Haoua's development.

Additionally, Niger's political instability profoundly impacted Haoua and her psychology. Throughout the novel, the unrest in Niamey, and its surroundings is conveyed through radio and television. The conditions Abdelkrim depicts as a soldier in President Mainassara's unit during his brief visit to Wadata, in particular, is a direct reflection of the turbulent period Niger is going through:

> Some of the barrack have not received their wages for quite some time now. There is a great deal of unrest across the country. Many people want our president to step down. There has been a lot of trouble – unpaid wages, protests, plots, rumours of another coup, that sort of thing – mostly in the provinces. (Weston, 2012, p. 59)

The chaos in Niger reaches its climax when "the president of Niger, Ibrahim Bare Mainassara has been shot dead" (Weston, 2012, p. 318) at Niamey Airport. However, it is Abdelkrim's death "in a skirmish" (Weston, 2012, p. 319) that becomes a real turmoil for Haoua and her development because he was more than just a brother to Haoua; he was also a mentor and, after the death of their mother, her only source of support. Hence, Haoua describes what the loss of her brother means to

her, noting that "Suddenly it seemed that everything I had once thought of permanent, solid, reliable, had begun to fragment" (Weston, 2019, p. 319). In other words, it is true that postcolonial societies, often marked by legacies of violence, corruption, and economic instability, create environments where personal development becomes a luxury rather than a norm. Moreover, the constant state of crisis in politically unstable regions forces characters to prioritize basic survival over self-realization, leading to stagnation rather than growth. This environment of instability causes the bildungsroman's traditional ideals – self-improvement, education, and social mobility – to seem irrelevant or impossible as it is in the case of Haoua. The anti-bildungsroman form, therefore, becomes a powerful vehicle for illustrating how political turmoil denies individuals the agency and security needed to pursue meaningful personal growth. Instead of transformation, the narrative arc is one of inertia, as characters struggle against forces that ultimately nullify their potential for development.

Conclusion

Gavin Weston's Harmattan subverts the conventional Bildungsroman by presenting a protagonist, Haoua, whose journey is marked by fragmentation, stagnation, and systemic oppression rather than growth and maturation. Unlike the traditional Bildungsroman, where the protagonist undergoes personal development and integration into society, Haoua's story unfolds as a narrative of devolution, driven by external socio-political and cultural forces that obstruct her path to self-actualization. Through non-linear storytelling, interrupted education, and forced marriage, Haoua's potential for growth is thwarted, symbolizing the broader issues faced by girls in traditional and patriarchal societies. The anti-Bildungsroman structure of Harmattan challenges the reader's expectations by demonstrating that, for some individuals, the trajectory of life is not one of fulfilment or maturation, but one of continuous setbacks and diminished prospects. Haoua's eventual imprisonment and her inability to realize her dreams underscore the tragic consequences of oppressive societal structures. In this way, Weston's novel critiques the impossibility of personal development in contexts where systemic injustices, particularly against women, prevail. All in all, Harmattan serves as a powerful commentary on the limitations imposed on individual growth in postcolonial African societies, making it a profound example of the anti-Bildungsroman form.

This study is significant not only for its literary analysis of Harmattan but also for its contribution to the broader discourse on how the anti-Bildungsroman form reflects the lived realities in postcolonial societies. By exposing the structural barriers that obstruct individual self-realization, the novel invites readers and scholars to reconsider the applicability of Eurocentric narrative models – like the Bildungsroman – in postcolonial contexts. Instead of portraying linear development, Harmattan critiques the very conditions that make such development impossible for many, especially girls and women in traditionally structured societies.

Moreover, this analysis highlights how literature serves as a medium through which socio-political critique can be articulated and disseminated. Weston's novel not only brings attention to gender-based violence, educational inequality, and postcolonial disillusionment, but also compels readers to reflect on the global systems of aid, development, and representation. As such, Harmattan is not only a narrative of personal tragedy, but also a poignant commentary on the limitations of progress within contexts shaped by historical and structural inequality. By examining Harmattan as an anti-Bildungsroman, this study adds to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to decolonize literary forms and foreground voices marginalized by dominant paradigms of growth, identity, and agency.

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