

READING ARUPA PATANGIA KALITA'S AYANATA AS A FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN: GROWING UP OR GROWING DOWN?

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Abstract

The present study attempts to analyze Arupa Patangia Kalita's eminent Assamese novel *Ayananta* from a feminist perspective. The feminist perspective proved most useful in analyzing the ways in which nineteenth and early twentieth-century women novelists had represented the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity and maturity by patriarchal gender norms. The female Bildungsroman demonstrates how society provides women with models of 'growing down' instead of growing up, as is the case with the male model.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Feminism

Renowned literary critic M.H. Abrams defines the Bildungsroman as a 'novel of formation' or 'novel of education'. Also known as 'coming of age' novels, these novels generally deal with the development of the protagonist's mind and personality, focusing on the conflicts between an individual and the surrounding cultural forces, be it family, neighbourhood, religion or ethics, against which the individual tries to establish herself/himself. The journey from childhood to adulthood is marked by a quest for identity that ultimately leads him/her to maturity and the recognition of one's identity and role as an individual.

The term 'Bildungsroman' was introduced to the critical vocabulary by the German philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey, who first employed it in an 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher and then popularized it with the success of his 1906 study *Poetry and Experience*. For the last several decades, the principal reference of the British novel of formation has been Jerome Hamilton Buckley's *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, published in 1974. According to Buckley, a *Bildungsroman* is a novel that portrays all but two or three of a set list of characteristics, among them "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy". *Season of Youth* contains analyses of a number of modernist texts, most centrally Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*, and Golding's *Free Fall*.

When the term entered the ranks of feminist criticism in the 1970's, it carped at the idea that the original model for the protagonist of the Bildungsroman is the male hero and the genre has been male dominated. Even Buckley's *Season of Youth* faced criticism for the fact that he focuses exclusively on male novels of development and completely neglects the female

Bildungsroman. In reaction to the neglect of female writers in general and female protagonists in particular, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland published *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983), a collection of essays on the female novel of development.

The feminist perspective proved most useful in analyzing the ways in which nineteenth and early twentieth-century women novelists had represented the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity and maturity by patriarchal gender norms. According to Annis Pratt (1981), the female Bildungsroman demonstrates how society provides women with models of 'growing down' instead of growing up, as is the case with the male model. As social constraints work differently for men and women, female development was not characterized by the possibility to explore a social environment. The present study attempts to analyze Arupa Patangia Kalita's eminent Assamese novel *Ayananta* from a feminist perspective.

Published in 1994, *Ayananta* is set in the pungent years before and after India's independence from the British rule. The novel traces the eventful life of its lively young protagonist, who is forced to grow beyond her years, by the insensitive society and her insecure family. The young girl is lovingly named Binapani, a popular name for goddess Saraswati, by her grandfather Nanda Barua, who could intuitively recognize the spark of wisdom in his grandchild. It is important to note that the Bildungsroman tradition has always represented conflicts between individual agency and society, subjective and social structures. Adhering to this rule, Patangia's novel, from the very beginning shows Binapani's rebellious nature as she stands up for what she thinks is just, without any fear for the dreadful consequences. Thus as Mary Anne Ferguson discusses in *The Voyage In* that whereas the male Bildungsroman describes the protagonist's development as spiral which leads him to the achievement of self-realization after his spiritual and psychological journey in the external world, the female protagonist's development is circular where she does not have the same possibility as her male counterpart to go out into the world to find herself. She is expected to remain at home to learn the ways of her mother. As in Binapani's case, unable to tame their feisty daughter, her parents send her off to her mother's house where she was expected to become docile and obedient and grow up to be an embodiment of submissive femininity under the control of her uncles and her grandfather.

Esther Kleinbord Labovitz lists a number of characteristics of the female novel of development: self-realization, inner and outer directedness, education, career, sex roles, attitude toward marriage, philosophical questions, religious crisis, etc. which testify to the different developmental process of the female protagonist. Binapani is shown in the novel as a spirited girl, an epithet of health and wisdom. She cannot withstand injustice, and as she grows up she is exposed to the evil practices of the world. Her mother, always depressed and constantly complaining, seemed distant to her who much preferred the earth mother image projected by the grandmother. Unlike her cousins, Bina is sent to a missionary school where she is intimidated by the lives of the nuns and her classmates. She excels in her studies and weaves dreams of serving humanity with her education. But rudimentary customs and traditions shackle her dreams and she is forced to leave school after she attains puberty.

Owing to the turmoil of the pre-independence days, Bina sees the joys and sorrows of innocent civilians and their myriad ways to handle the atrocities of landlords and the British. However, she also comes to know of the British missionaries who selflessly toil to improve the condition of the down-trodden people of the region. She happens to come in close contact with the Missionaries who established the first printing press in Sibsagar. These Missionaries endeavored to print the sacred texts of the Hindus in the Assamese language. Bina developed a

liking for Ratan MacFarlane, a young Christian boy working for the Missionaries, who came to copy the manuscripts of the holy texts belonging to her ancestors.

The lives of different characters serve as a lesson in Bina's 'coming of age' as she comes to know of the true nature of people, hidden behind the false facade of social pretense. Bina realizes the fragility of a woman's body and mind, when Ruma, her most beloved cousin, loses her sanity, on being brutally tortured by her much older husband. As Camila Brändström cites in *Gender and Genre*, "The female protagonists search for knowledge has a more negative effect on her because she feels burdened by social injustices, as she cannot take action to solve the problem"(16). Bina's heart cries at the sight of Bogi, who is ostracized by the society just because she is the illegal child of the Mauzadar Karuna Barua. Karuna Barua's involvement in the liaison is undermined by the society and indeed he is worshipped by the surrounding people. Bina cannot bear this biasness and discrimination in the part of the unfeeling people.

The text challenges the coherent feminine self that patriarchal society attempts to impose upon women by representing the protagonist Bina engaged in multiple roles and formulating multiple self-definitions against the inflicted ones. The text bears the message that women need to play multiple roles as part of the strategy to subvert the 'self' imposed upon them from the outside and to move toward the development of an autonomous female identity. Along the narrative it is shown how she tries to improve other people's lives and her own fate by defying the age old customs, shaking off the rusted shackles of superstitions; how she tries to break the crumbling walls that strangulate the free spirit of a woman. Her boldest decision was taking the responsibility of Tagar, Ruma's daughter, a child whom no one wanted to keep as she was suspected of carrying down Ruma's insanity.

But, soon enough, Bina faces the same fate as Ruma. Despite much protest on her part her mother is ready to marry her fourteen year old beautiful, delicate daughter to a much older, plump womanizer. At this point the readers are excited to know whether Bina succeeds to change her destiny, without bringing shame to her family, resist the charms of first love, and succeed to make a difference to Ruma's, Tagar's and Bogi's lives or would she succumb to her family pressure, and waste her life as a docile maid to her rude husband? Will the text really represent the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity and maturity by patriarchal gender norms, as claimed by the feminist critics? These questions form the basic frame work of *Ayananta* and the readers are apprehensive of the Bina being incapable of autonomy and integrity.

As Ferguson points out in *The Voyage In* women in fiction who violate the norms and refuse to follow the female pattern of development are perceived as rebels and they end up unhappy or insane. Bina indeed becomes too compliant and starts believing in the worthlessness of a woman without her man. She commits a blunder by yielding under family pressure, compromising her free spirit. Bina, in her role as a mute, docile wife appeared a stranger to the readers, miles apart from her earlier image of a rebellious, determinate girl.

In her essay 'The Female "Bildungsroman": Calling It Into Question', Carol Lazzaro Lewis states that a Bildungsroman generally consists of "socially critical answers, in which the individual attempts to transform or transcend social relations...in which social relations are beneficently arranged to foster the growth of the protagonist"(26). So, when the readers are taken aback by Bina's deviant transformation, Arupa portrays Tagar as a strong young girl at the opportune moment and re-establishes her hold on the story. The novel ends on an optimistic note with the protagonist's realization of her identity and role as an individual. Bina, in the dusk of

her life rediscovers her purpose, independent of her family, husband and sons and the novel ends with the promise of a new dawn as suggested by its very name (*ayan-* night, *anta-* end).

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