

The Novel of Self-Discovery: A New Mode of Representation To Confront feminine Subjectivity

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Abstract

The genre 'Novel of Self-discovery' marks the re-emergence and renewal of the Bildungsroman as a literary structure relevant to women's current experiences. The contemporary genre of 'Novel of Self-discovery' outlines an obvious growth plot in which the female protagonist shifts from a condition of estrangement to a finding of female individuality through a procedure of going away from male-recognized principles. 'The Novel of Self-discovery' is suited to express the emergence of women from cultural conditioning into confrontation with institutional forces and into personhood. It in effect deals with the individual's harmonious maturation. All the elements that constitute this self-maturation-like spiritual crisis, identification of one's individuality, one's responsibility in the society, become all the more relevant and significant in the case of heroines. These narratives of female self-discovery employ typical feminist literary techniques like sharing of experiences, storytelling, introspection and self-analysis through flash backs and interior monologues, giving shape to a separate genre which can be termed 'Novel of Self-discovery'. The present paper highlights the major thematic and structural features of its fictional pattern.

Key Words: *Novel of Self-Discovery, Bildungsroman, genre, feminist literary technique, confrontation*



The upsurge of feminist, post-modernist and minority explorations in post 1980s steer to an extension of the conventional definition of *Bildungsroman* and the fresh conceptual approaches are totally altering the discipline. Consequently, the genre is widened to comprise coming-of-age novels that bring only superficial similarity to nineteenth-century European narratives. The writers of this period trigger to notice their age as a period of change from conventional metropolitan narratives of development and social assertion to ever more global and disconnected narratives of alteration and rebellion. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, (1990) Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990) show that the genre can be made suitable for modernist and post-modernist literary devices. The quest for self-discovery has become an extremely wide and influential notion in the postmodern period in which several Indian women writers look for new modes of representation to confront feminine subjectivity in order to ascertain an identity. So, the theme of coming-of-age novel, that is, the *Bildungsroman*, is a repeated narrative strategy employed by women writers for self-discovery and Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *To Whom She Will* (1995) and *Heat and Dust* (1975), Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) are excellent instances.

An analysis of the features of *Bildungsroman* thus becomes necessary to understand the struggle of the protagonists in the course of their quest for self-discovery, which leads them towards freedom and selfhood. The term *Bildungsroman*, borrowed from German literary criticism, literally means "Formation Novel", is the forename attached to those narratives that focus on the growth or edification of the protagonist. The German word, "bildungs" denotes formation, and "roman" suggests novel. It refers to a narrative of many-sided growth. A *Bildungsroman* is, mainly, the narrative of a protagonist's maturation and evolution within the background of a distinct social system. The maturation procedure at its core a search account, has been presented as both training to life and a quest for purposeful being within society. To urge the male or female protagonist on their voyage, some type of defeat or dissatisfaction should jolt them at an early phase, afar from the house or family situation. The procedure of growth is longish, strenuous and step- by- step, including frequent conflicts between the central character's desires and cravings and the outlooks and opinions imposed by a rigid social structure. Finally, the outlook and ethics of the social order become visible in the hero, who is eventually reconciled into the society. The narrative concludes with the hero's appraisal of himself and his new position in that society. In the words of M. H. Abrams: "the subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences- and often through a spiritual crisis into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (193).

The *Bildungsroman* as a literary form in the context of women and feminism acquires subtle implications. Traditionally, the *Bildungsroman* is a male affair because as Louise. F. Caton observes: "it has a perceived history of only turning the boy into the man, not the girl into the woman" (126). Thrall, Hibbard and Holman define it as a "novel which recounts the youth and young manhood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning

and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life and the art of life”(31). In the eighteenth century Tom Jonesonian model, the myth of the ideal individual who is brave and complete in himself is conserved for men alone. In the nineteenth-century American fiction chiefly, it is the men who commence on journeys of self-disclosure. The women, as depicted by both men and women fictionists, reside securely in the house, pleased to acknowledge society's label of themselves. “American matrons and virgins symbolize the repressive society from which the men must escape in order to penetrate the secrets of the universe. Women maintain the status quo, preserving class distinctions, transmitting the accepted morality, and insisting on order and decorum” (Weir 427). The presence of the female in the *Bildungsroman* is just to help the part of the hero. Her growth is not delineated; to a certain extent, she is only a signal in the voyage of the male protagonist—a gauge of his achievement or disappointment.

The feminist yearning for equality, identity and liberation manages to acquire a suitable literary expression in the term Female *Bildungsroman*, which transmutes the traditional male myth into an effective female form. It is characterised by a sequential and direct organization; female self-disclosure and liberation is portrayed as a procedure of going away from one's own place and take part in social commitment and action. In *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as Literary Genre*, Susan Suleiman states that feminist *Bildungsroman* is an instructional genre which intends to persuade the reader of the authenticity of a specific explanative structure by leading her or him to an aggregative and reflective comprehension of the incidents depicted in the text. An exploration of the distinctive features of *Bildungsroman* in turn reveals a number of similarities between the composition of current narrative of female individuality and liberation determining feminist thought itself.

The ‘Novel of Self-discovery’ is structurally different from both the dreamy romances and the didactic narratives of the earlier period. The narrative of female self-discovery offers obvious differences to earlier representations of women's lives. The eighteenth century narrative is incapable to imagine of deliberate revolt on the part of the female protagonist and the nineteenth century fiction outlines an inner waking and confrontation which is on the other hand squashed by a stubborn social structure. In the recent fiction of female self-disclosure plots, a narrative of confrontation and endurance made feasible by the intervention of the feminist movement, which gives a theoretical frame allowing the deliberate assertion of a womanly individuality.

In the ‘Novel of self-discovery’, narrative seeks to negate the cultural authority of one version of women's experience in order to put an alternative version in its place. The rise of new plots for women, which highlights independence as opposed to reliance, is an evidence of the impact of women's movement upon the social and theoretical sphere. There are a number of contemporary feminist novels which depict female self-discovery as a process of confrontation, internal growth and self-understanding rather than public self-realisation. The protagonist becomes seriously

conscious of the restrictions of her life and her complete compliance of the restricted nature of women's social tasks. The heroine's struggle against existing constraints necessitates her symbolic or literal transcendence in the self-discovery fiction. It is basically an optimistic genre which affirms women's self-recognition as a subjugated set and subsequently a possible protest to existing social standards.

In 'Novel of Self-discovery', the narrative bears obvious resemblances to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* genre. Although keeping the typical compositional qualities of the genre, the 'Novel of Self-discovery' varies in significant modes from its literary ancestors. For example, the conventional male *Bildungsroman* is a basically traditionalist type; the male protagonist's inexperienced notions are slowly torn through confrontations with the cruel powers of reality and finally he is accommodated into the existing social order. In 'Novel of Self-discovery' by women writers, it is not social affiliation, which is the female protagonist's objective, but the resurgence of an altered identity. Some form of emblematic or exact disappearance from the social order is the prerequisite for the acquisition of identity, which necessitates an essential break with the female protagonist's earlier history and with traditional methods of perception. The protagonist's journey does not indicate a giving up of values and acknowledgment of restrictions, but rather makes the prerequisite for adversarial ventures and undertaking.

The conventional *Bildungsroman* is obviously gender-specific; the male protagonist is unrestricted to voyage into the cosmos in his search for self-recognition. The condition of the current heroine is completely divergent. She has to fight excruciatingly to liberate herself from the inferior position she has engaged in the man woman association. So, the shift from the circle of the household into the social order, from the personal into the universal, is a possibly far more emancipating procedure than that of the hero. The male *Bildungsroman* is often defined as a novel of apprenticeship and usually portrays the upbringing and early adulthood of the hero. The 'Novel of Self-discovery' encompasses a much broad range of age. It is usually only after the matrimony that the female protagonist recognizes and throws out the enticing falsehood of marriage as the basic to woman's self-identity. The journey the heroine embarks on is mainly a personal and inward one and she recognizes that she has lost her identity, as in the *Bildungsroman* this quest often possesses a collective dimension. In 'Novel of self-discovery', self-discovery is represented as a coming to consciousness of a latent female self. In the narrative of 'Novel of Self-discovery', the protagonist's journey is a circular one in which the destination coincides with the starting point but *Bildungsroman* is linear in structure. The finding of female identity can best be described as a process of awakening rather than learning, a recovering of what has always been present but suppressed. Awakening is of course a purely inward and individual experience, not a social and public act.

The 'Novel of Self-discovery' deals with the female protagonist's search inward, depicting her interior experience. It is a symbolic journey resulting in a changed consciousness. Self-awakening is the result of this transformation and the

new self-awareness makes a base for imminent negotiations with the society. It is a saga of confrontation and continued existence made feasible by personal emancipation from current theoretical and societal restraints through persistence. The current self-discovery story deviates from prior texts portraying the silent suffering or accepting the destiny with resignation of the fictional female protagonists. As a substitute, one finds the regular use of a new storyline form, in which the sufferings and dilemmas of the central woman character does not end in her ensuing demise or failure but gives her the drive for a constant rejection of patriarchal ideals. The ideological and social limitations are challenged through a story structure that embodies a radical rupture with the old.

The narratives of ‘Novel of Self-discovery’ deal with interior experience and it traces the protagonist’s voyage inward rather than outward, in search of a hidden female self. The internal journey’s foundation lies in the heroine’s battle against time-honoured tradition. The protagonist’s journey is symbolic rather than historical. The psychological transformation of the heroine or a change in viewpoint can happen rapidly, in the form of a quick enlightenment or slowly through a constant growth of awareness into the constructions of supremacy prevailing associations between men and women..

Self-discovery is a “development process occurring over time” (39) as Felski defines it in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. The female’s wakening is differentiated by its chain of circumstances. Undeniably Felski implies: “the heroine must become what she once was, recover an identity which is complete and self-contained rather than contingent, and historically and socially determined” (141). Resowski in her article “The Novel of Awakening” observes: “The protagonist’s growth results typically not with ‘an art of living’, as for her male counterpart, but instead with a realisation that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible; it is an awakening to limitations” (49).

The figure of a female friend or encounters with other women enacts a metaphorically vital role in the central female character’s progress in the ‘Novel of Self-discovery’. Felski concurs, emphasizing that “Encounters with other women also form a central part of the discovery process... the group of women providing the organic and harmonious community... opposes the rationalized world of male society” (35). The discovery of the other woman provides a metaphoric role as a confirmation of self, of feminine identity. It is deep-rooted in an established tradition of woman bonding which appears as a persistent subject matter in women’s writing. Thus the theme of woman bonding or sisterhood is an integral part of contemporary narratives of self-discovery. When the woman is able to find a reflection of herself as a woman in the other person, she is able to relate and bond with the other woman. Woman bonding is regarded by feminists as a refuge from and a challenge to the oppressive factors of society. It is strongly advocated as alternatives to patriarchal oppression and dominant social norms. In Mary Daly’s words: “The ‘bonding’ phenomenon among women, expressed by the word

'sisterhood', is essential to the battle against false consciousness. Only women hearing each other can create a counterworld to the prevailing sense of reality" (189).

The protagonist undergoing self-discovery finds herself in circumstances of desolation, another significant feature of the 'Novel of Self-discovery'. In most of the 'Novels of Self-discovery' the position of marriage as the objective and limit of female growth is queried by the coming out of a new plot, which looks out to reveal the deficiencies of the old. The new story refuses the theoretical foundation of the conventional script branded by female submissiveness, reliance and subjection and there is an endeavour to evolve a different narrative and typical structure within which female identity can be located. In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, *Lessons in Forgetting*, Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*, *Afterwards*, *Secrets and Lies* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* are models of the symbolic pragmatist plots which create the realities of conventional household, the inertia of typecasts role-playing and the severe oppression of conjugal ensnare but which strategically and ideologically present a feminist reconstruction of hegemonic and established social and literary framework.

"The Self-discovery narrative tends to focus upon the process of psychological transformation rather than upon a detailed exploration of its social implications" (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 133). The female protagonist's new self-awareness makes a beginning for future conciliation between the subject and society, the result of which is envisaged beyond the boundaries of the text. The contemporary feminist novel does not usually supply any such closure, and the query of the final societal outcomes of personal conversion is left open.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the genre of 'Novel of Self-discovery' does not content with the present gender-specific relationships and images of women, but provides a different perception of female individuality. The contemporary self-discovery narrative traces a unique plot, which delineates some form of alteration from estrangement and lack of self-awareness to emancipation and identity. The genre "retains an essentially optimistic belief in the possibility of female development" (Felski 125). Break with parental authority and conflict between societal expectations and individual goals are the common experiences of all these heroines. Sexual liberation and initiation have a role to play in their personal development. At the thematic level if these novels concern themselves with such stages of "consciousness raising", at the narrative level, introspective analysis, journey motif, archetypal stories, sharing experiences help them to bring out the psychological, moral and social formation of the protagonists. The sum total of it is the sub genre 'Novel of Self-discovery' - "the most deeply embedded and culturally significant forms of the symbolic production of meaning" (Felski 127). The preceding analysis of the conventions of 'Novel of Self-discovery' clearly establishes, to put it in T.N Dhar's words: "What is important... is the different strategies [the novelists] employ to realize [her] ends, and the manner in which all these impinge on the shape and style of [her] novels" (26).

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Bio-note



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