

**THE FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN: CONCEPTUALIZING WOMANHOOD IN
NURUDDIN FARAH'S FROM A CROOKED RIB AND CHIMAMANDA
NGOZI ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS**

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the depiction of the growth into womanhood in the coming-of-age narrative genre as a gender-specific experience that not only reconstructs identity of the protagonist but also reformulates the genre itself. With respect to Judith Butler's study of the performative and socio-cultural construction of gender identity, the article presents an analysis of the coming-of-age of the female protagonists in Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as a gender specific socio-culturally constructed experiences rather than simple biological or emotional growth and proposes to explore how the reconstruction of the Bildungsroman genre with respect to the gender specific experience in these two novels deconstructs the patriarchal social structure and enable the authors to assert the autonomy of self and identity for the protagonists.

KEYWORDS: Bildungsroman, Gender, Identity, Performativity, Adolescence & Womanhood

1. INTRODUCTION

The coming-of-age narrative has traditionally remained one of the most popular techniques in novels focusing on the maturation process of the protagonists. Bildungsroman has effectively served as the necessary tool for reflecting on the inner development of the young adult protagonists, mostly male, in terms of depicting the process of reaching manhood within a given socio-cultural set-up. It is not until recent years that gender identity has begun to be considered as one of the most significant dimensions of the coming-of-age experience. As Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, gender identity is not natural, fixed, or essential, but, is performatively constructed and discursively regulated within culture. She thinks that gender identity is culturally scripted and is generated by power in terms of repeated citations of norms. With the paradigm shift from the biological to the socio-cultural in the field of gender studies, the focus in the Bildungsroman narrative has also become diverse. From the stereotypical depiction of young boy reaching manhood through trials and tribulations within the society, the genre has shifted into depicting the nuanced experiences of young protagonists in terms of their gender identity within the given socio-cultural set-up.

2. BILDUNGSROMAN AND GENDER IDENTITY: THEORY AND CONCEPT

Though the difference between the male and the female Bildungsroman is not as distinctive as the genre itself is, the depiction of the development of the female protagonist expectedly differs from that of the male protagonist and has evolved through the centuries along with the evolving awareness about gender. As pointed out in *A Study Guide for "Bildungsroman"*:

The female protagonist of a Bildungsroman encounters problems specific to growing-up female in a male-dominated world. Early female Bildungsromans with female protagonists mostly follow the traditional pattern that the

mature female sees marriage as her fulfilment. Intellectual and social development is often achieved through the mentorship of a knowledgeable and sophisticated man. In some early nineteenth-century female Bildungsromans, the female's education occurs through an older and wiser husband. Later novels portray women entering marriage as the culmination of the mutual growth that occurs in a loving relationship.

While a male protagonist in a Bildungsroman may meet his pivotal crisis in the course of his professional career, the female protagonist's turning point may result from a romantic entanglement. Her journey of discovery may be more internal, or psychological, than that of her male counterpart. (Gale, N. pag).

In the depiction of the development of the female protagonist, the narrative distinctively involves the female gender experience. The paper is aimed at analyzing the employment of the Bildungsroman genre in depicting the female experience and identity in Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

3. CONSTRUCTING AUTONOMY: BILDUNGSROMAN AND WOMANHOOD IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S FROM A CROOKED RIB

The story of Farah's novel *From a Crooked Rib* features an 18-year-old girl named Ebla whose journey towards maturity and autonomy is its central concern. Ebla is an illiterate teenage girl who is raised by her grandfather after the death of her parents at a young age. Away from the educated elite population of urban Somalia, she is raised within a predominantly oral and patriarchal pastoralist community which is represented through her quintessentially patriarchal grandfather. Already at bay from her tribesmen in terms of thinking and temperament, Ebla leaves home to escape a proposed marriage with a much-aged man and joins a caravan heading towards Belet Wene. The story goes on to explore the various dimensions of Ebla's journey through which she emerges as an independent woman capable of self-assertion against the manipulative and appropriating advances of a patriarchal society.

While the text describes her escape as one of the defining moments in her life and goes on to explore the series of incidents she goes through following this in a somewhat picaresque manner, the paper argues that the search for freedom and self-assertion involved in the act sets the score for a coming-of-age narrative depicting a journey of an adolescent female protagonist towards attaining a deeper understanding of her own self, gender identity and assert autonomy within a predominantly patriarchal and hegemonic context. Central to Farah's argument in most of his novels is his concern with personal freedom and autonomy achieved by a constant struggle with the manipulative and appropriating state-discourses. Culture, religion, patriarchy, and gender identity become crucial aspects in the representation of his politics of autonomy. Farah's comments after Ebla escapes are very significant in this regard: "her escape meant the divine emancipation of the body and soul of a human being" (Farah 12–13).

The Bildungsroman structure in the novel is employed to explore not only Ebla's journey towards womanhood but also the assertion of her autonomy from a patriarchal set-up. The process of maturation and development leads Ebla towards understanding the aspect of responsibility associated with that of personal freedom. Whereas at the time of leaving her grandfather's house, the text goes on: "Not once in her life had she stopped doing anything because it would harm others....If she stayed, she thought, she would always be in low spirits. And if she went what would happen?" (Farah 10); towards its end, the text witnesses Ebla developing into and evolving as a matured human being able to take responsibility of actions she chooses to commit as she asserts, "I am responsible for my actions" (Farah 158–59). She goes on further towards self-understanding and development as the text describes: "She looked into herself and found something new

about herself. She looked into herself literally – a thing which she had never done before” (Farah 161). Alden and Tremaine observe, “What does evolve significantly [in course of Ebla’s journey] is her consciousness of her own subjectivity, of her power to reconceive herself and the world” (Alden 47). Ebla formulates a concrete sense of identity as an independent woman in course of her development through her relationships with different men. From leaving a much-aged groom to whom she was sold by her community in return of camels, to escape from another self-degrading marriage arranged by her cousin Gheddi to a tubercular cattle broker in return of payment, Ebla’s growing education about the patriarchal structures of the society – both rural and urban – enables her to assert her own will and retain autonomy in her later relationship with Awill. It is the democratic equation inherent in her relationship with Awill that enabled Ebla to attain a deeper understanding of her own self which eventually enables her to achieve autonomous identity as a woman capable of living within a society on her own terms outside any male-affiliated structure. With this attaining of maturity in *From a Crooked Rib*, Ebla, later in *Sardines*, the second novel from Farah’s trilogy “Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship”, is enabled to attain economic independence and raise her child all by herself within a predominantly male-dominated society. Ebla’s journey in the novel thus underscores a gender-specific experience of coming-of-age that enables the protagonist to attain autonomy from within a patriarchal social structure.

4. DECONSTRUCTING PATRIARCHY: COMING-OF-AGE NARRATIVE AS TOOL OF SELF-ASSERTION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE’S PURPLE HIBISCUS

Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* also revolves around the coming-of-age story of an adolescent girl, Kambili Achike, against the background of the 1960s Nigeria. Kambili is a school-going teenager from the Igbo community, who, along with her teenage brother Jaja, is raised under the hegemonic paternal care of a rigidly Catholic patriarch. As Eugene, Kambili’s father takes the decisions of the family members all by himself without any mutual discussion, the chances of Kambili’s development as an independent individual is already very limited. Confined within Eugene’s disciplined domestic space, Kambili and her brother have limited access to self-actualizing experiences. The development of their perception of life and the ways of the world, as well as the development of their gender-specific sense of self, is stunted under the patriarchal dictates of their father within the household. Kambili, along with her brother, is given access to the age and gender-suitable experiences only after she comes to stay with her aunt at the university campus of Nsukka, away from the disciplines of her father. Following political turmoil in Nigeria and the murder of their father, Kambili is forced to grow-up to survive. The coming-of-age of Kambili involves several dimensions – the dichotomy between indigenous culture and Catholicism, the binary between patriarchal family structure and that of gender equality, the binary between domination and autonomy etc. As is the case in *From a Crooked Rib*, in *Purple Hibiscus* too, the development of the protagonist involves a shift in the order of the domestic and personal space in terms of a journey from the indoors of the household towards the outer world, which happens here in terms of Kambili and Jaja’s shift to their aunt’s place. As encounter with the outer world educates Ebla about how to retain her gender-specific identity and autonomy within the patriarchal social structure, Kambili also develops awareness of how to survive in terms of her encounter of the hardships of life, especially as her father is killed by her mother and her brother takes the blame on himself. The Kambili who remained silent when her father’s physical abuse of her mother led to the latter’s abortion, becomes capable of keeping the portrait of her grandfather with her against her father’s orders after her return from Nsukka. In a first-person narrative, she says: “Perhaps it was what we wanted to happen, Jaja and I, without being aware of it. Perhaps we all changed after Nsukka... and things were destined to not be the same, to not be in their original order” (Adichie 209).

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie's use first person narratorial voice gives the reader's an insider's view into Kambili's consciousness and lays bare her vulnerability as the narrative captures her evolution from girlhood to womanhood. Like Ebla, Kambili also develops understanding about her sense of self as a teenage girl in terms of male companionship. In both cases, the intertwined development and maturation of the physical and emotional aspects that are characteristic of any adolescent female experience determines the course of further progress of both the protagonists and sets the narrative in the respective stories.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, in *From a Crooked Rib* and *Purple Hibiscus*, the coming-of-age narrative has been employed to reconstruct gender identity in terms of asserting autonomy of existence from within predominantly patriarchal domestic and social spaces. The reconstruction of the domestic and the societal spaces in order to rebuild identity as strong independent women not only formulate an autonomous form of existence but also in turn, reconstructs the Bildungsroman as a genre of depicting the growth of the protagonist on the basis of gender specific experiences of growth, development, and coming-of-age. Both Ebla and Kambili grow into womanhood on their own terms and in process, learn how to cope with and reassert their identity as individuals with their gender-specific identity from within patriarchal social structures.

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