

The Ugly Bildungsromans- Subversion, Dissent and Assertion in Toni Morrison and Latifa Al-Zayyat

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Received: May 28, 2022

Revised: June 12, 2022

Accepted: June 25, 2022

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the multiple layers of oppression women go through in the postcolonial, hetero-normative, orthodox, patriarchal society as portrayed in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* and Latifa al-Zayyat's novel *The Open Door*, which she wrote in the year 1960. It also attempts to understand and highlight how different Female Bildungsromans are when compared to the conventional Male Bildungsromans. The intensity of the struggle which the protagonists of these novels are facing, makes one dub these novels as "The Ugly Bildungsromans". Two characters from different spaces and different times, Layla from *The Open Door* and Sethe from *Beloved*, are discussed in this paper as one attempts to underscore the similarities, as well as the differences their struggles have, while also attempting to accentuate the reasons for the similarities and differences. Both of the characters are frustrated existences due to their social condition, and are required to make choices in order to reclaim their identities as human beings.

Keywords: Bildungsromans- Subversion, Toni Morrison, Latifa Al-Zayyat

Introduction

The Ugly Bildungsromans- Subversion, dissent and assertion in Toni Morrison and Latifa al-Zayyat

Skimming through the book of *Comparative Literature: Terms and Concepts* one will understand that the reader or the audience of a literary production has just as much importance as the author and their prerogative. Be it from the section associated with Hans Robert Jauss' theory of "Reception" where it is stated that, "The Reception of a particular text is an interaction between the text and the reader, which is regulated by the genre, tone, structure, and social conditions of the reader, the author and the world of the text", or that one part dealing with H.R. Jauss' theory of "Horizon of Expectations", which basically elucidates how an author takes into cognizance the expectations of their audience or readers while choosing and maneuvering the Rohstoff before manifesting it into the Stoff of their literary work. Therefore, the significance of the "readers" or the "audience" are foregrounded in this book. The audience is an important factor for writers because they either write to suit their expectations based on what the popular themes or the dominant social order of the contemporary times or to break the Horizon of Expectations, going beyond what the society expects from the author, which often baffles the audience. This act more than often invites criticism until attaining "normalcy".

Toni Morrison (1988) and Latifa al-Zayyat's novels fall under the latter category and thus are also considered "the ugly Bildungsroman", especially the Morrison's novels. When one is talking about the writings of post-colonial feminist writers like Morrison (1988) and Latifa al-Zayyat, they may be reminded of J. Nozipo Maraire's quotation: "Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter" To understand the reason behind it, we need to take into account the fact that for the ones who have been oppressed for centuries, whose voices have been suppressed or ignored, even a whisper can be equated with dissent. When women from the races which have been crippled by the colonial forces like Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison (1988) or Toni Morrison, and Latifa al-Zayyat write, especially about female protagonists, they accentuate how females, as the secondary creatures when compared to males in the hetero-normative, orthodox, patriarchal society, are subjected to even more layers of oppression. It is to be rightfully stated that if the colonized are oppressed, the female section of the colonized are doubly oppressed. In a patriarchal community, the women are perceived to be the tools for satisfying men, but if the community is colonized then even their "masters", the men of that community are also dehumanized. Then, one may wonder where do colonized women, as secondary creatures who are "owned" by dehumanized men stand? It is no wonder that their oppression is intensified by colonization, which, also being an extremely patriarchal apparatus, further destroys their sense of self.

Morrison and Latifa al-Zayyat's novels portray the lives of these women who are dehumanized beyond words. The trauma depicted in these novels make these Bildungsromans "ugly". To comprehend how, we need to first understand the term "Bildungsroman". According to Merriam Webster, the German term "Bildungsroman" was coined by combining two German words, "Bildung" which means "education" and "Roman" which means "novel". Therefore, a "bildungsroman" is a novel which usually talks about the formative years of the protagonist, portraying their psychological development and ends on an optimistic note. Abrams (1981) in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, defines it as "'novel of formation' or 'novel of education'" (121), the subject of which is "the development of the protagonist's mind, character, as he passes from childhood through varied experiences-and usually through a spiritual crisis-into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world" (121). Harmon & Holman (2000) offer another definition of the bildungsroman decades later which defines it as "a novel that deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity" (59). One may wonder how can the story of such a journey be dubbed "ugly" but it is to be stated that the aforementioned people probably had novels like *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* when they were talking about bildungsroman. They both essentially have male protagonists. However, Felski (1986) highlights the "new function" of the female bildungsroman where "an articulation of women's new sense of identity and increasing movement into public life" (137) can be observed, as we notice in Latifa al-Zayyat's novel *The Open Door*. Born in Damyat, Latifa al-Zayyat was an exceptional Egyptian writer and also a famous activist. As a professor of English Literature and Criticism at the Girls' College at Ain Shams University, the Director of the Arts Academy and an important member of the Supreme Council for Arts and Humanities, published many literary criticisms, political essays, short stories, memoirs, a play, and novels. Although she is more known for her political activities, her literary works also have great significance as they are still considered to be way ahead of its time even in the 21st century Egypt. Her novel, *El Bab El Maftuh* or *The Open Door* which some claim to be semi-autobiographical, is a spectacular tale of a woman breaking the shackles of not only patriarchy but also of colonialism.

Sherif Abdel Samad begins his article on Latifa al-Zayyat called 'Dauntless to the end', by commenting the following lines about her bildungsroman *The Open Door*, "...Latifa took on the widespread of misogyny in Egyptian society like no other writer before her. The novel criticized the way women had to behave and dress, without attracting the slightest attention to themselves; the self-hatred with which the protagonist Laila grows up because she is a girl; and the social barriers that are placed in front of young women in the name of tradition and morality." The novel is set on the backdrop of the Egyptian War of Independence, which was from 1946 to 1956. The story begins on the day after the massive demonstration at Ismailiya Square of 21st February 1946 against the British forces who continued to defy the treaty of 1936 and occupy the Suez Canal which, should have been returned to Egypt according to the treaty. The prolonged political unrest compelled many civilians to volunteer as freedom fighters against the British forces. In such a chaotic situation, the story commences as her brother Mahmud's is hit by a British bullet at the Ismailiya Square. The first chapter introduces the protagonist of the novel, Layla Sulayman as an eleven years old girl. We witness from the very beginning of the story that she is rather estranged from her family as we see how she has to wake up earlier than others just to read the newspaper, fold it back properly and leave it where it originally was if she does not want to be beaten by her father. As she is set beside her brother, it is evident that their parents discriminate between Layla and her brother in every way possible just because Layla is a girl and Mahmud is a boy, the simplest example being the fact that Mahmud is allowed to read the newspaper but Layla is not. The patriarchal apparatus, by reducing women to nothing but toys for serving men, sees only the body of a woman. There are three things which make a woman "ideal" in the patriarchal society- ability to reproduce, beauty and docility. We are informed that little Layla is lacking in the latter two departments as she is neither exceptionally beautiful nor docile. In fact, she is a rather bold and rash of a girl, making her unlikeable by her parents.

The whole scenario of her choosing to read the newspaper secretly in spite of her father's objections highlights her defiant nature. The following lines from the first chapter of the book adumbrate the future of such a defiant, and rash girl in a heteronormative, orthodox, patriarchal world, [Layla] reached for the sliding bolt. Her father's lips trembled, his face going even whiter as he raised eyes so faded they might have been gazing from a corpse rather than from Sulayman Effendi. He stared at his daughter. "Where're you going?" he asked in low, edgy tones. "To look for Mahmud." At her words and the hint of defiance in her voice, his dreary eyes flashed. He closed them. "Go back inside". (Latifa, 6) Throughout the novel, we sense the presence of an invisible door which Layla has to unlock to go out. The patriarchal society resonates with the words of her father who orders Layla to go back inside without any space for negotiation or communication of any form, as this society considers that women belong only within the house as her own school's headmistress reiterates. It is to be taken into cognizance that in the same chapter we find out that when Mahmud was going out to join the demonstration, Layla and Mahmud's father only "urged" (Latifa, 6) him not to go but Mahmud could still go out of that door. There is more than just a scope of communication for Mahmud which Layla does not possess at all. We witness her struggle to break through that door as the patriarchal forces in the form of her father, mother, lovers, and even her beloved brother who is a part of the progressive movement against the colonizers and in the end also breaks the chains of patriarchy himself, compel her to be so scared of the outside, of the whole idea of freedom, that she almost herself chooses to be petrified, and give up on everything she actually desires for a false sense of security. Her real struggle begins with the beginning of her menstruation, which marks her first step towards womanhood. Joseph T. Zeidan in his "Latifah

Al-Zayyat: The Open Door” in Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond comments, “the beginning of this age is marked by a bloodstain that appears on Layla’s skirt and is removed with a knife by her cousin in the school’s bathroom (not surprisingly, symbols of violence are associated with the process of sexual maturity)” (166) After this, as her father comes to know that Layla has started to menstruate, he is seen to be in absolute agony and further issues orders to confine Layla even more.

Layla is visibly shocked because she remembers her father celebrating Mahmud steps towards adulthood while when it came to her, he is shown to be wailing miserably. It is being told that women in a patriarchal world still has some sort of freedom and autonomy of self as innocent children but the moment they enter adulthood, they are stripped off of even that because at that point, to become a woman is to become a sexual being who is responsible for ensuring the sanctity of her community by following the dictates of patriarchy. “On that remarkable evening Layla had not been able to fathom why Gamila had given her that melancholy gaze, or why her father had wept. It was only with the passage of years that she came to understand...she grew to the realization that to reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one’s life were clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stood her father, her brother, and her mother. Prison life...is painful for both the warden and the woman he imprisons. The warden cannot sleep at night, fearful that the prisoner will fly, anxious lest that prisoner escapes the confines...Yet, the prisoner feels in her bones that she is strong...she finds herself held by powers that...impel her toward freedom.” (Latifa, 24) Indeed, Layla has the power to attain her own freedom by herself, but unfortunately, she ends up understanding freedom in terms of only finding the ability to love and to be loved in return freely as love is shunned by patriarchy, perhaps owing to the factor that it gives some agency to women whose every part of body is regarded to be the property of a man. It is unacceptable and outrageous that the object called woman who does not have the right to even breathe without the permission of her male guardian, is given the opportunity to “feel” something. As Layla is struggling to live, to accept her changing body, and to simply exist without being reprimanded for every little thing like even sitting comfortably, she realizes that her relationship with her guardians, who are her family members, is that which a slave and a master share. She is supposed to stay subservient and subjugated without a whimper. Ironically, she can feel somewhat liberated from her claustrophobic life only within her room which is the only place where she can be herself. There is nobody to scold her for how she sits, eats, talks, moves, or whatever she does when she is alone in her room. Her room becomes the place where she is a non-conformist. Although outwardly she shows to be listening to her parents but inwardly, she protests by thinking about things which her society considers sinful, she thinks about love and passion.

There she indulges in her fantasy world where she dreams of being saved by a prince charming without understanding that the if she wishes to be saved by a man, then she is only giving herself up to another tool of patriarchy. Patriarchy works in such subtle ways that one does not often even understand that they are being conditioned to follow its dictates even unconsciously. Therefore, Layla is unable to comprehend that freedom is something which she has to attain herself, nobody can give it to her. Hence, under the watchful eyes of her wardens, especially her mother, Layla’s claustrophobic life continues as she slowly becomes too self-conscious. Even though she is still a defiant on the inside but patriarchy slowly conditions her in a way because her own body becomes suffocating to her and as the patriarchal world demands, she becomes so conscious about the eyes of people, about how others will judge

her, she can no longer express herself as freely as she could as a child. But, something in her changes as she joins the demonstration, disregarding Gamila's warnings. A number of incidents before the demonstration made life so unbearable that Layla "walked as if bound in heavy chains, dragging her body behind her, shoulders hunched and head pitched forward as if determined to get where she was going with the utmost haste before she could possibly attract the glances of others" (Latifa, 27) Just by juxtaposing the following lines with the aforementioned ones, we can surmise the impact of the demonstration on Layla. "she felt an embarrassed shyness about her full body and was sure that every pair of eyes on the street was focusing on her. The rhythmic yells surged like waves... she felt a surge of energy. She felt alive, at once strong and weightless, as if she were one of those birds circling above. [her voice] seemed not her own, it united the old Layla with her future self and with the collective being of these thousands of people - faces, faces as far as she could see. (Latifa, 51) The term "freedom" is very abstract even if it is used very often. The idea of freedom varies from one person to the other. Therefore, for a girl like Layla, with very little agency to fathom the various kinds of freedom or have the understanding that even though she is marginalized, she has all the rights to define her own freedom, it was very easy to associate it with something we all hear about and that is romantic love. Fairy tales, folklores, movies, songs, almost everything, especially in Layla's time, preached about love even if it is also considered to be sacrilegious. Perhaps, as discussed earlier, the fact that love was sacrilegious somehow made her unconsciously want to associate it with freedom, as everything she desired were dubbed so anyway. However, the moment when she joined the freedom struggle for the first time, was probably the first time she started understanding what this vague term "freedom" meant to her. Husayn tells her that to attain freedom is to give up the "I" for the "we" and in the demonstration, Layla also experiences it.

The lonely girl who felt unaccepted even at her very home, finally found connection amongst the freedom fighters where nobody even cared to judge her, everyone was focused on the greater cause of attaining freedom for the country. But this dreamy moment was ephemeral as her father horribly beat her up for doing something so ungraceful like joining a demonstration which the patriarchy considers to be a task for the men, not women. When Layla is vulnerable due to her father's brutal battery and her beloved brother's harsh words of disapproval, Isam, her maternal cousin comes to comfort her. Afterwards, to escape from her oppressive, and suffocating reality, and by believing that she can still attain freedom through love, she makes Isam her whole world. But that dream world is also shattered when Isam has an affair with a maid. She realizes that even Isam is a slave of patriarchy who differentiates between women as "accessible" or "devils" and "un-accessible" or "angels". The first type is to lust for only and the second type is for marrying. Layla, after witnessing the real face of Isam was completely devastated. Isam was her struggle for freedom and the realisation that this symbol of freedom was so different from her imagination, enfeebled her soul. She felt that if her freedom is disgusting and wrong then whatever her parents and patriarchy have been preaching must be right. Exhausted, she gave up on fighting and in search of stability, she takes refuge in the arms of professor Fouad Ramzi who resembles her father as patriarchs and also wants her to "parrot his opinions" (Latifa, 230). After giving up on freedom, Layla endorses patriarchal ideals of her mother who drilled in her brain that anyone who abided by the rules of the society "[c]annot go wrong, and cannot weaken, and will not lose any confidence in herself" (Latifa, 44) and seeks stability in Ramzi who also endorses the same traditional patriarchal ideals even if he wears modern clothes. An emotionally drained Layla believes that a traditional man like Dr. Ramzi will offer her the love based on purity, sanctity, and truthfulness

which she desires. In search of that love, she denounces herself and accepts whatever Ramzi states without batting an eye. However, the announcement that “the door was now open for female students who might want to volunteer for the National Guard” (Latifa, 246), opened her door towards the freedom she actually wanted. Only a push was required for her to walk out of that door which came in the bitter form of Ramzi’s claim in their engagement party that he does not believe in the existence of the “pure love” which Layla believes in and in his revelation that he is marrying her because, “Because you are compliant and quiet, and you listen to me, and you do what I say” (Latifa, 272).

The final straw was overhearing the disgusting conversation Ramzi had with Mahmud on the very day. Although initially going forward with the preparation of marriage with Ramzi despite everything, after a certain point she decides to escape from her agony by fleeing to Port Said, where the love nest of Mahmud and Sanaa is, who emblemize the fact that love and defiance can go hand in hand as Mahmud rebels against traditions to marry “[o]ne of those girls who let down their hair and do whatever they please” (Latifa, 285); their life together takes place in a new distant setting away from the family and in the heart of the national struggle. After going there, Layla becomes even more aware of the political situation and the final push comes in the form of the bombing incident, due to which Layla emerges as a brand new person. “All the voices, all calling her, all trying to get her to stand up, all preventing her from giving in. Something inside her was responding, too, something vast springing from deep within, something new and powerful that would not leave her be, something stronger than the fire that burned in her chest, than the iciness that shuddered in her limbs, stronger than the overwhelming desire to let go, than the dirt, than death.” (Latifa, 339) The national struggle helped Layla break free from the shackles of patriarchy. Through participating in the dissent against the colonial forces, she also fights against the patriarchal order. As if going through the seven stages of becoming one with Allah which Sufism talks about, Layla goes through an arduous “safar”, finally finding the truth of her “self” by uniting with the masses. Just like how a Sufi saint goes through the annihilation of the “I” to unite with the “we” and finally unites Allah, Layla beautifully finds Husayn when after discovering her own “Self”.

Latifa’s spectacular bildungsroman makes us go through Layla’s journey of self-discovery as we witness the mirage of freedom becoming her reality. Although tumultuous, the adjective “ugly” does not suit *The Open Door* properly. But it may suit the bildungsromans of Toni Morrison perfectly. To understand why, we first need to take into cognizance that colonialism affected different regions of the world differently. The situation which was almost offered by colonialism to Layla to break free from patriarchy, was not present for many people who are like the characters of Toni Morrison’s novels like *The Bluest Eyes* and *Beloved*. For them, colonialism was an absolute nightmare which destroyed them in multiple ways. Salvatore’s (2002) in her essay “Toni Morrison’s New Bildungsromane: Paired Characters and Antithetical Form in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*” states, “The traditional notion of the bildungsroman features a male protagonist who demonstrates “heroic” achievement by overcoming social and moral obstacles, defining a unified, autonomous self, and developing ethical authority through the narrative. In stark opposition to this traditional conception of the genre, several of Toni Morrison’s (1988) novels present African American female protagonists who inevitably lose the struggle against the double oppression of gender and race, fail to create authentic identity, and thus falter in the pursuit of ethical and narrative authority.” (154) The above quotation brings us back to the discussion about bildungsromans because of the existence of novels like the *Beloved* by Toni Morrison which exemplifies the new type of Female

Bildungsroman which explore the depths of the fractured sense of self of the colonized women, who are, as stated before, doubly oppressed. Even in Latifa's novel, we notice that the protagonist has to deal with a more disordered world about which she is not allowed to properly gain much information. A popular saying states that to know the world, one must know themselves first, but the female protagonists of post-colonial novels are not in the position of knowing either.

Thus, their struggle to understand themselves, and evolve as individuals is extremely difficult, as a result of which, their sense of identity is very unstable. Toni Morrison's novels portray the lives of Black Americans or those we also call the African Americans. The appalling, repulsive, and sickening history of slave trade is not a secret as a simple search on the internet reveals how inhumanely Africans were treated by the white colonizers. We get a vivid picture of the kind of torture the people of the Black community were subjected to and the inter-generational trauma that followed in Morrison's works. The story of *Beloved*, centers mainly around Sethe, an ex-slave. Her past as a slave is so traumatizing that, "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (Morrison, 1998). As we go through the story, we find out that both her and her mother were slaves, her mother was killed for trying to escape, although it was slightly hinted, her mother probably tried to escape by herself without Sethe which means, she was abandoned by her only parent at a very tender age. As she reminisces the past, we find out that she was dehumanized beyond words at Sweet Home as not only was she whipped so much that she has a permanent, gruesome scar on her back, but she was also treated like an animal as the schoolteacher's pupils were tasked to draw her so called "animal characteristics", she was violently ravished by the schoolteacher's nephews when she was trying to escape from Sweet Home, and ultimately, even after all that, when she escapes from her hellish days at Sweet Home and starts to find happiness in her new home, she is compelled to kill her two-year-old daughter, who is named *Beloved*, in order to primarily save her from going through the same horrors of enslavement that she had to suffer in the hands of the schoolteacher, and also to escape from re-enslavement herself. Although she manages to save herself and her children from slavery, her dark past haunts her. The character of '*Beloved*' can be considered to be the representative of the past. In the first part of the book, we come to know that Sethe's house is haunted by *Beloved*'s spectre and we can analyse it as the family being haunted by the past.

Sethe, due to her past trauma, has developed very problematic coping mechanisms, that is to stay in denial, building walls around her heart to the point of refusing to communicate with her own community, and suppressing her emotions. Owing to this, although she can go by, she is still haunted by *Beloved*. Healing from trauma requires reconciliation with the past, which is a process of looking back at the past, accepting the scars received from it, and then moving on along with those scars. Paul D's arrival initiates the Sethe's first step towards healing, but reminiscing the traumatic past is extremely painful, and perhaps thus *Beloved* manifests as a person in the novel at that point. It is probably an implication of how vivid the past can be, especially if it is traumatic. Sethe's refusal to recognize *Beloved* as her daughter even after getting many hints is an indication that she is still in denial of the past. This denial makes her suffer, but the moment she does accept it, her life becomes even more miserable, because now she is dwelling on the past, without making any effort to move on from it. Sethe could have started her life anew with Paul D, but he leaves her after finding out that she killed her own daughter, but because of *Beloved*, or her past, Sethe does not even try to explain her circumstances to him, and simply lets him go. She even blames Paul D for her inability to

recognize Beloved as her daughter. We can surmise from the factor that unlike Beloved, who was growing “bigger, plumper by the day” (Morrison, 1988), her obsession with Beloved was making Sethe thinner as “The flesh between her... forefinger and thumb was thin as China silk” (Morrison, 1988). Only with the help of Denver, Sethe’s youngest child, who fixes their connection with their community, and gets rid of Beloved’s spectre with their community’s women’s aid, Sethe is saved from Beloved. Morrison may have been implying that healing for the victims of colonization, begins by reconnecting with one’s community because the colonizers’ did their level best to destroy the sense of community amongst the colonized. “Sethe’s loss of control over her life and personhood, the hallmark of her experience as a slave...prompts her to an exaggerated sense of her role as a mother. She tries to empower herself by grasping total control over the destiny of her children, to the extent that she takes Beloved’s life rather than allow her live as a slave... Sethe’s distorted attempt to gain control over her life fails totally...” (Salvatore, 2002) Sethe, who equated her exaggerated motherhood as the only way of having autonomy over her own self, and finding freedom, is completely shattered in the end of the novel after the disappearance of Beloved. Therefore, when Paul D returns and tries to make Sethe acquire some desire to live, she states how, by losing Beloved, she has lost her “best thing”. When Paul D claims that Sethe is herself her “best thing”, Sethe is unable to comprehend the meaning of such words and thus asks in absolute bafflement, “Me? Me?” (Morrison, 1988).

We are not told the aftermath of Sethe's life. Does she finally reconcile with her past and heal properly? It is not stated clearly. We are only told that slowly, but steadily “They forgot [Beloved] like a bad dream...remembering seemed unwise”, however, we are also told that this act of forgetting is not in the absolute sense. It is akin to simply moving on. Her presence still lingers on just like how the past can never be erased totally. “You wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (Toni Morrison, *The Song of Solomon*) The bildungsromans of Toni Morrison and Latifa al-Zayyat suggest this very fact along with portraying how difficult it is to actually let go of the things that weighs one down. As Fuderer (1990) comments in the introduction of the. *The Female Bildungsroman in English* that these novels hit us with “the realization that the art of living is difficult or impossible for a woman.” (Fuderer, 4) and as Susan J. Rusowski states in the same book that in female bildungsromans, as the protagonists grow up, they are subjected to have ““an awakening to limitations”” (Fuderer, 1990). Waxman (1985) in “Bildungsroman o Reifungsroman: Aging in Doris Lessing’s Fiction” comments that the protagonists of the female bildungsromans unlike the male bildungsromans, face “growing down” instead of “growing up”. Latifa al-Zayyat’s novel ends on a very optimistic note although Layla also suffers from “growing down”, and *Beloved* also ends on an ambiguous note even though here also we witness the fall of the protagonist. Therefore, it can be safely said, that although these protagonists regress, they either reclaim their selves as Layla or has the possibility of doing so like Sethe. Works Cited.

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