



A Bildungsroman Study of Rosa in Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and Wanja in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood: A Comparative Analysis.*

ASHISH AWASTHI

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

C.M.P. DEGREE COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF ALLAHABAD

Abstract – The novel written in the bildungsroman genre started in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe. A novel that deals with the protagonist's struggles for education, survival in society and his/her moral and psychological development in the story is known as a Bildungsroman. Since the 1980s, the term 'bildungsroman' has been widely used in literature among African critics, though in critical aspects. Nadine Gordimer, in her novel *Burger's Daughter* (1977), portrayed Rosa Burger as a bildungsroman character. Since her childhood, she has witnessed the atrocities of apartheid law in South Africa. Her parents were also anti-apartheid, and they too have faced many trials and investigations imposed by the government. The development of Rosa Burger in the novel is an obvious example of a bildungsroman. *Petals of Blood* (1976) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a polyphonic novel set in post-independence, Kenya. Wanja is a central character of the novel and the whole plot of the novel is woven around her presence. Like Rosa Burger, she has also suffered many setbacks in her life. But she was determined to do something better in her life on her own. Wanja is a rare example seen in the writings of black African writers. This paper will explore the bildungsroman aspects in both the novels, primarily focusing on the protagonist of both the novels. The paper will try to explore how the phenomena of Western bildungsroman are different in the post-colonial and African contexts. The comparison of both the characters will also be done on the parameters of the bildungsroman aspect.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, African literature, Nadine Gordimer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Post-colonial Literature

Introduction: The term Bildungsroman originally came from the German word “Bildung” which means education or formation and “Roman” stands for a novel, which exemplifies that the Bildungsroman represents the novel of education. Stendhal, Goethe and Thomas Carlyle initiated this genre and Dickens, James Joyce and Mark Twain brought the best of this genre. As novel writing progressed, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, Sylvia Plath and Thomas Mann gave new heights to the genre of bildungsroman. Though novel writing in the bildungsroman genre was originally started in the 18th century in Germany later this genre was popularised by all the writers across the globe. In this genre, novelists explored the ethical and psychological evolution of their characters striding in an unfamiliar world which took them to new challenges, experiences and boldness.

After 1950 the centre of literary creation shifted to third world literature. Writers and thinkers from post-colonial countries like Asia, Africa Canada, New Zealand and Australia have initiated new possibilities in the genre of bildungsroman in novel writings. These writers took novels in bildungsroman to investigate new stories about belonging, self-detriment, cultural upbringing and spiritual revival. Novelists of the Indian subcontinent such as Amitav Ghosh, U.R. Ananthamurthy, Rushdie and Anita Desai, for example, have established the form by portraying literary tropes, such as the pilgrimage, from classical Hindu, Sufi, and Buddhist literary traditions. They have mostly unfurled this form to discover how youth in India confront questions of decolonization, independence, and self-determinacy. Accordingly, writers from the African continent such as Gordimer, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and Abdulrazak Gurnah have found the bildungsroman to as an influential medium to explore revolution and absolute social change in connection to the socio-political developments in their respective countries. The African Bildungsroman is a literary cultural genre that is defined by its dialogic engagement with pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history. It acknowledges the rich and diverse philosophical principles and the ontological traditions of before and after colonial societies and defines an ideological expression of this genre. Against the disappointingly resilient Western narrative of a mysterious continent, notable variations of the African bildungsroman such as the AIDS narrative, show how effective the genre has been for African writers in investigating individuals, nations and traditions in crisis. The African understanding of Bildungsroman portrays a crucial offering to the reconfiguring of the form and an active literary tradition in its own right. Its existence reminds us that genre can be volatile without losing meaning, and that form, out of socio-historical necessity, is regularly reborn.

Discussion –

(I) In *Burger's Daughter* Gordimer took her character of Rosa Burger to the touchstone of the committed white South African to a new plane: Gordimer portrayed the character of Rosa Burger with moral dilemmas who is born into the traditional white political resistance. Rosa is the daughter of radical activists Lionel and Cathy Burger, who are the representatives of a generation of white activists who came to prominence in the 1950s. Lionel is modelled on a historical figure of South Africa named Bram Fischer, a lawyer and parliament member of the South African Communist Party. The novel portrays Rosa's disillusion with, and ultimate recommitment to, political dissidence in post-Soweto Africa, where Black Consciousness severely restricts the possibilities for committed white action. Rosa is the foundation of Gordimer's novel. At the ground level, the story of the novel is to find a reasonable place in the society where her parents had actively participated in the anti-apartheid movement. Gordimer explicated this as the "conflict between the desire to live a personal, private life, and the rival claim of social responsibility to one's fellow men – human advancement. Through Rosa Burger, the question is posed and explored" (149,2003) The blurring of the boundaries between 'hard fact' and fiction evinced by the correlation between Burger and Bram Fischer anchors Rosa's story in a politically and historically specific context, one that indicates the desire for social revolution, as she ultimately accepts and then embraces her inheritance. Clingman echoes this point, observing that "the figure of Burger acts as a bridge in the novel between fact and fiction, and past and present, as the methods of the novelist and a more orthodox historian coincide" (172, 1992)

In the novel, *Burger's Daughter* (1979), Rosa's parents were not the typical white couple who hated black people, because they wanted racial equality. Their outlook on life is expressed in the following quote: "Being white constitutes a counter definition whose existence my father and mother were already arguing between dancing to the gramophone at the workers' club" (120, 2000).

The fight for freedom struggle was to be achieved by the majority of blacks, but also with the support of a small group of white revolutionaries. However, this selected group of white people had to make a clear distinction between class and black consciousness so that they were not blinded or lost focus on the ultimate prize. This duality is portrayed by who should lead or be at the forefront of the struggle.

The future he was living for until the day he died can be achieved only by black people with the involvement of the small group of white revolutionaries who have solved the contradiction between

black and class consciousness, and qualify to make unconditional common cause with the struggle for full liberation, e.g., a national and social revolution. (123, 2000)

Gordimer extends her consideration of the relationship between private and public realms in this novel by making Rosa's story representative of a people. Her life is portrayed in a symbolic parallel with the apartheid period: she is born in May 1948, the very month the first Nationalist government came to the regime; the period of her childhood and adolescence is punctuated by key political happenings - the Treason Trials, the Sharpeville massacre; Rosa's acceptance of her mission as the Burgers' daughter comes in the wake of the Soweto uprising, and Rosa is among those victims who were detained, arrested, or banned in October 1977.

In *Burger's Daughter*, the tensions between private and public responsibilities are paramount. Raised in a family of well-known communists, the central figure Rosa is instilled with the innate belief that political principles come before personal ones. Her father's passing has released her previous responsibilities. She can create a new identity because she is the only survivor of her immediate family. Her attempt at living a quiet life leads her to France, where she experiments with a daily routine of self-indulgent pleasure, much like a youngster learning a new sport. She nearly learns to unwind in the conventional sense while taking in the splendour of the seaside close to Nice and associating with a kind of group of people who have retired either permanently or temporarily to enjoy the Cote d Azur joys. Despite being married her French partner offers a peaceful new life in France as a disillusioned young adult starting over in a democracy used to receive a large number of these immigrants from other autocracies. However, a painful encounter with her old acquaintance Bassie in London prevents her from having a quiet future. She reasserts her recognition as Lionel Burger's daughter, goes back to South Africa, and abandons her political responsibilities following her father's passing. As the novel closes, she is incarcerated pending trial on a political accusation and like her father, she is observing the pattern of light created by her cell wall's reflection at dusk.

In the novel, there are three phases of Rosa's life have been explored by Gordimer. First, her childhood where she struggled with the trial of her parents. The second phase of her life was when went to France and lived a blissful life there. The third and most important phase of her life occurred in her life when her step-brother Bassie shattered her by humiliating her over the exaggeration of her father's sacrifice and struggle for the apartheid movement. Bassie's words were a bitter pill to swallow for Rosa because she was living in an illusion until Bassie opened her eyes.

Everyone in the world must be told what a great hero he was and how much he suffered for the blacks.

Everyone must cry over him and show his life on television and write in the papers. Listen, there are

dozens of our fathers sick and dying like dogs, kicked out of the locations when they can't work any more. Getting old and dying in the prison. Killed in the prison. Its nothing. I know plenty of blacks like Burger. It's nothing, it's us we must be used to it, it's not going to show on English television. – (328, 2000)

After these words of Bassie Rosa decided to fly back to her native country South Africa. This maturity and realization in the personality of Rosa Burger bring out the bildungsroman aspect in the novel *Burger's Daughter*. In the creation of this character, Gordimer very consciously brought out these aspects in the personality of Rosa which were rarely seen in the earlier South African fictions.

(II) The female characters in Ngugi's novels have the willpower to make choices beneficial to them and society. As Jennifer Evans points out Ngugi's women "are all in their own ways 'resistance heroines' and the strongest symbols of cultural identity, community and continuity" (131, 1987). In the novel *Petals of Blood*, the character of Wanja marks a growing interest of Ngugi in the making of a tenacious figure. Wanja flourishes in dimensions where female literary personalities traditionally do not. In her attachment to the native land her strength as a mother a nurturing figure for the overall society and her calibre to forge her path, Wanja is a protagonist with vibrant agency and authority.

At first look, Wanza's role as the sole main female character seems to hold out hopeful if teetering prospects for African female and their representation in the works of their expanding collection of African and postcolonial literary canon in general. The aspect of Wanja's personae that appeals to many feminists without question is her agency. Wanja in our opinion, is a welcome departure from the conventional, meek, dramatic, male-dependent, and uninteresting heroines. Ngugi has a lengthy roster of feminist support in his writing oeuvre. For example, Judith Cochrane validated that it is the Gikuyu women "rather than their menfolk who seem to have the better understanding of the needs of their people and the new Kenya, and who seem better able to reconcile those needs with traditional values and customs" (90). Deirdre LaPin points out that Wanja is an "admirable, indeed heroic, character" (116)

Ngugi has used Wanja as a trope and she has been characterized as an archetypal. Ngugi portrayed Wanja as an allegorical figure that has symmetry with the place Ilmorog. Both Wanja and Ilmorog have been widely exploited by the capitalists of the society. In all her difficult times Wanja got the support of Nyakinua the old lady of Ilmorog who knows about all cultures of the Gikuyu community. Also, Nyakinyua is always willing to receive Wanja in Ilmorog after occasionally abandoning her hectic career as a barmaid and prostitute. Distinctively, Nyakinyua has passed her

courage and defiance to Wanja, the woman who never allows men to reduce her to obscurity. Single-handedly, Wanja transforms from a simple village girl to a sophisticated woman. She knows how to trap greedy men with her appealing looks. Indeed, Wanja makes money from these men before killing them to revenge for the wrong they did to her and the community.

Wanja is archetypal in the sense that any character meant to dramatise an abstract philosophy, such as Fanon's must be archetypal, given the way her complexity is shown, as are the other primary protagonists. A genuinely individual character would contradict Ngugi's collective Marxist ideals and the odd quirky figure cannot serve to symbolise a significant or "type" of society. That is why the novel has collective heroes and villains rather than just individual ones. Karega, Abdulla, Munira and Wanja comprise a heroic worker quartet, whereas Kimeria, Chui, and Mzigo constitute a comparable opposing force of tyranny. Similar to her male counterparts, who are teachers, political activists and small business owners, Wanja is "typed" to represent a national women's identity in Ngugi's vision. This all was demonstrated by Wanja's beauty which rises in exact proportion to her proximity to the soil.

It is also possible that Wanja's wish to become a mother is a specific allusion to women's history as well as a generalisation of the circumstances in Africa. Wanja's first child's death symbolises the early death of children overall in Kenya. The Mother's killing of the kid is a clear allusion to the newly Independent Kenya, which is suppressed by the same heroes who previously battled to establish and support it. Wanja is an artist who captures politics and aesthetics in her pictures of the working class, perhaps more so than any other figure and perhaps more like Ngugi himself. Wanja refuses to give a name when asked who her child's father is, choosing instead to use her artistic talent to fuse the past, present and future as well as struggle and victories, man and woman into a portrait of Abdulla. The father of Wanja's child is this oneness. In a way that ultimately aligns with Ngugi's Marxist ideals, Wanja, like Ngugi exposes her abilities to represent a new birth and the possibility of the new feature of prosperity and strength. In this way, Wanja serves as both historically particular representatives of the nation's female viewpoint and a key player in Ngugi's idealised vision of a new Kenya through the development and revision of that new Kenya via her newly discovered creative ability which rivals Ngugi's. Her portrayal of Abdulla is a good representation of Ngugi ideology and Kenya's cultural importance. As Ngugi contends, "From my writing one can see that the past, present and future are bound and interrelated. My interest in the past is because of the present and there is no way to discuss the future

or present separate from the past” (58, 1984). Ngugi wanted to establish a nation of his ideals and Wanja represents all those qualities through her personality which is required to have an ideal society.

The psychological evolution in the personality of Wanja is the most vital aspect that makes this novel a genre of bildungsroman. In her teenage Wanja was sexually exploited by her sugar daddy who relinquished her after Wanja became pregnant. Due to this shame, she was humiliated by the society and her parents and she had to leave her home. She was filled with anger and humiliation towards the merciless capitalist society. She wanted to become independent and wanted to take revenge on all those who had physically and mentally harassed her. That is why she becomes a barmaid in the Ilmorog town to establish herself on her own. The cruelties of society have forced her to become opportunist and overambitious. She was raped by the MP of Nairobi when she went to his office for the help of the poor people of Ilmorog who were due to lack of harvest with the grace of drought. Through the character of Wanja, Ngugi shows that women are very hardworking and full of creative ideas. Wanja forms a group named Ndemi-Nyakinua with some of his companions whose aim is to cultivate and weed the land. Wanja through this group wanted to enhance the potential of working women. Wanja is a modern girl but simultaneously she has great faith in traditional values. She started working as a barmaid to earn some money but her earnings were not much sufficient. Her father was not very supportive of her, so, she decided to become a prostitute and open a brothel. Ngugi believes that due to imperialistic and neo-colonial circumstances, women like Wanja have suffered a lot in independent Kenya. Wanja to some extent tried to tackle the ongoing problems but it was not easy for her. Mala Pandurnag a postcolonial critic has to say about this:

Significant in Ngugi’s portrait of Wanja is the amount of heroic energy packed into her tortured body, for despite the numerous violent experiences that have seared her psyche, she still emerges as an admirable character who exudes the most telling traits of selfless humanism. Or how does one explain her offer to work as Abdulla’s barmaid so that Joseph could start schooling? Or herself sacrifice to the vulture Kimeria who wanted to possess her for only a few minutes if only to save the life of Joseph during the trip to the city? But all these acts of humanism by Wanja do not save her from the agonies inherent in a bruised soul that had thrown her baby into a latrine long ago in her school days. And with her aborted relationship, with Karega in Ilmorog, and the changing tempo of capitalist, intrusion into the lives of Ilmorogians after the plane crash, Wanja throws herself —body and soul into capitalism and emerges as one of its few reigning queens in New Ilmorog. (Pandurang; 2007)

Ngugi depicts Wanja as a strong, genuine and careful lady but because of the cruelties of society, she becomes stern. Wanja kills Kimeria who earlier rapes her to take her revenge. This murder could be defined as the liberation from the mental and physical exploitation that she bore. In the portrayal of Wanja's character, Ngugi brings out all those qualities that make a female character strong. As James Stephen Robson asserts:

Wanja, like her predecessor, Mumbi is the most resilient and the most victimized character in *Petals of Blood*. Her betrayal is the most complex of all the characters. Like Munira, she faces the memory of past recriminations concerning her father and Kimeria. Like Karega, she leaves Ilmorog during crisis situations. She abandons cooperative endeavours for the personal profit of Theng'eta and the Sunshine Lodge. Like Abdulla she is capable of neglect as in the case of Nyakinyua. Yet despite these betrayals, she is capable of regeneration. This is evident throughout the novel from personal sacrifices on the —journey to the cooperative farmers 'organization in Ilmorog to the elimination of Kimeria before the fire in Sunshine Lodge. Wanja's character is later proletarianized further through Wariinga in *Devil on the Cross*, although in her case the possibility of a regenerated political environment is less likely. (Robson; 1987)

Ngugi created the character of Wanja with multifaceted qualities. Before Wnaja there was no such valiant female protagonist seen in the fictions of Black African writers. Wanja's characters open up with post-colonial interpretations of the bildungsroman phenomenon.

Conclusion – The paper tried to explore the protagonists of both novels from the perspective of bildungsroman. Both novels were written on the African continent but the setting and background completely varied from each other. The only similar thing about both protagonists is that both are female and both of them were trying to establish their own identity where they could stand on their own. In terms of social privileges, Rosa is luckier than Wanja because she belongs to the white class but she never took advantage of her colour because her parents were activists of the anti-apartheid movement. On the other hand, Wanja was born in a conservationist Kenyan family where she was not allowed to love freely to her lover. In the end, both the protagonists overcame their odds and struggled to prove themselves on the better side from where they started. It is the most established trend in the literature a text or character can be analyzed and examined through multiple theories and trends. Post-colonial thinkers and critics like Homi K. Bhabha, Ami Cesaire, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak have done multiple experiments with the classical and ancient texts of literature. Literature has always given a place for interdisciplinary

studies where a piece of literature can be analyzed from various angles. These studies have opened new discussions in the sphere of research.

References and Citations:

1. Gordimer, Nadine. *Burger's Daughter*. Bloomsbury Publishing. 2000.
2. Thiong'o Ngugi wa. *Petals of Blood*. Penguin Classics. 2005.
3. J. Newman (ed.), *Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter: A Case Book*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.
4. Clingman, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History From the Inside*. University of Massachusetts Press. 1992.
5. Evans, Jennifer. "Women and Resistance in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*." *Women in African Literature Today*. Ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones. et al. Trenton: African World, 1987.
6. Cochrane, Judith. "Women as Guardians of the Tribe in Ngugi's Novels." *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Ed. G. D. Killam. Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1984.
7. LaPin, Deirdre. "Women in African Literature." *African Women South of the Sahara*. Ed. Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter. Essex: Longman, 1984.
8. Killam, G. D., ed. *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1984.
9. Pandurang, Mala. Ed. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. New Delhi: Pancraft International, 2007.
10. Robson, James Stephen. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Fight Against Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism: An Exploration of the Theme of Betrayal*. (M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University.) 1987. P. 171-172. Print