



From Recalcitrant Youth to Sagacious Leader: *The Bildungsroman Odyssey of Moses in Biblical Narrative*

Dr. O. MINU AGNUS
 ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
 DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
 QUEEN MARY'S COLLEGE, CHENNAI

Abstract:

This paper attempts to reinterpret the biblical narrative about Moses through the lens of Bildungsroman, a literary genre that charts the character's psychological and moral growth from childhood to adulthood. It employs the critical framework of the transformation narrative to perceive the formative character arc of the Old Testament saviour, Moses. It examines how the change in the protagonist's psychological outlook aligns with the archetypal stages of classical bildungsroman - childhood, alienation, learning, and integration. It explores how the external exodus of liberated Israelites from the land of slavery to their covenant homeland mirrors Moses' developmental arc from a recalcitrant young man to a sagacious leader, culminating in his self-actualization. The application of this literary model of narrative to a sacred text not only highlights the theological and human dimensions of Moses' growth but also broadens the scope of the life-trajectory narrative.

Key Words: Bildungsroman, Self-actualization, Biblical narrative, Archetypal stages

Introduction:

The Holy Bible, the most widely read book in the world, is an anthology written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It comprises the foundational texts, sacred to two important religious sects of the world, namely Judaism and Christianity. It encompasses literature, law, epistles, and other works that resonate with themes related to God, His creation, His Covenant, and Salvation. The rich and complex literary landscape presented in the Bible, in the form of diverse literary genres, stylistics, and intertextuality, has kindled the interest of scholars to understand the literary dimension of the religious text.

Some theologians contradict the idea of viewing the Bible as a literary text. This is largely due to the literature-related elements, like "fictional and "creative," would derail or deny the preeminent trait of divine-inspired authorship. In contrast to this claim, P. House says, "studying the literary nature of the Bible no more negates the binding nature of the Bible as Holy Scripture than does examining its historical components." The significant theologians of the past, like Augustine, Jerome, and Martin Luther, have mentioned the prominent literary perspective in the Bible. Martin Luther, in his letter to Eoban Hess, has stated,

I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature, pure theology cannot at all endure.... Certainly, it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily.... (Bruch)

The underlying significance of the biblical characters can be elucidated only through implicit analysis. This is due to the fact that the characters presented in the Bible are often not described in detail. The sparse description of the characters in the narration prompts the literary analyst to decode their personalities through their actions, reactions, dialogues, and silence. The embedded latent dimensions of the characters are brought to light by the applications of various literary and psychological concepts.

Bildungsroman:

Bildungsroman is one such literary genre through which the biblical characters can be studied to foreground their deeper connotations. The term Bildungsroman was first used by Karl Morgenstern in his lectures and is derived from the German words **Bildungs**, meaning formation, and **Roman**, meaning novel. It is a narrative-centered genre that emerged during the German Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, after the decline of the feudal system and the spread of democratic ideas. The genre centers on how a protagonist's psychological, moral, and social development is shaped in connection to society. In a nutshell, the genre is all about the process of growing up rather than the state of being.

As a literary genre, Bildungsroman can be applied to any literary text to underscore the protagonist's psychological, moral, and intellectual growth from childhood to maturity. It emerged in the late 18th and early 19th century. Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is often considered the prototype of Bildungsroman. This genre underlines the protagonist's life trajectory by highlighting the struggles, trials, and integration leading to self-actualization. Maslow's succinct statement, "What a man can be, he must be" (Short), captures the essence of self-actualization, giving a psychological underpinning to the developmental arc of the Bildungsroman illustrated in the literary narrative. The textual analysis through the lens of Bildungsroman set the nurturing environment for the literary, psychological, and even theological interpretation.

The four archetypal stages of the Bildungsroman developmental arc, which offer a structured framework to trace the evolution of the protagonist's self, were not explicitly postulated by its exponents but emerged from the genre's conventions and critical analysis. Stage one, named childhood or innocence, hints at the protagonist's childhood, often shaped by the familial environment. Stage two is conflict or alienation, where the protagonist encounters a crisis leading to alienation. In the third stage, which is called apprenticeship, the protagonist engages in active learning through mentors, trials, or travels. The self of the protagonist is solidified in the final stage, which is called the stage of reconciliation and integration. The character emerges with a deeper understanding of the fullest potential of the self, signifying the meaningful closure of the developmental arc.

The framework of the Bildungsroman, which maps the growth of the character, can be applied to the sacred text to trace the character arc of the protagonist. This paper attempts to use this framework on the biblical narrative of Moses recorded in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Moses in the Bible Narrative:

Moses, the prominent character in the Bible, is considered to be the author of the Torah or the first five books of the Bible. Moses was born to Hebrew parents in the land of Egypt, where they were enslaved. Despite the desperate situation of his people, Moses had the privilege of growing up in the Royal Court of Pharaoh. Though he was treated as a prince in the royal court, the young recalcitrant Moses was very much aware of his Hebrew identity to the extent that he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who ill-treated a Hebrew slave.

Anticipating the consequences of his treacherous action, Moses fled to the land of Midian, where he married the daughter of the Midian priest. He began to shepherd his father-in-law's flock for survival. The forty years of monotonous service he rendered at his father-in-law's household made him forget all the forty years of princely education that he had received at the royal court of Egypt. Midian's wilderness transformed the Prince Moses into the Shepherd Moses. At this juncture, Moses confronted Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel, who appeared amid the burning Bush.

Moses became aware of the mission God had ordained for him. Initially, he evaded the responsibility of delivering the Israelites from Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land, but was ultimately persuaded by the Lord God to accept the mission. To heed the call, he left his life as a shepherd behind and went to the land of Egypt, where he encountered Pharaoh as per the instruction of the almighty Yahweh. Initially, it appeared that Moses' initiative was met with trials, but Pharaoh eventually yielded after witnessing the mighty hand of God of Israel through the ten plagues. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were in a state of trepidation, devastated by the grief and the fear of further catastrophe. The following verses from the book of Exodus clearly emphasize this idea:

Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. During the night, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me." The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!" (Exod. 12:31-33)

Then for forty years, Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness of Sinai, where, as a good leader, he mediated and interceded for his people before the Lord God of Israel. He taught them the law of God, which the Israelites ardently follow to this day. He led them to the threshold of the covenant land, and before his death, he eloquently delivered three significant and impactful sermons about God's power, God's promise, and God's covenant.

Analysis:

This formative character arc of Moses within the biblical narrative is mapped, aligning it with the four distinct archetypal stages of Bildungsroman to understand the protagonist's progressive shift in moral, psychological, and intellectual paradigms.

The initial stage of the bildungsroman begins with the Protagonist's childhood, where the environment seems to be restricted. In the confined environment, the protagonist experiences a profound sense of displacement, which urges him or her to feel neglected or oppressed. Moses, who is born to the Hebrew slaves, is forced to depart from his family as a newborn because of Pharaoh's decree. The Princess of the Pharaoh's court decides to raise Moses. She entrusts his biological mother to nurture him during his early years. As a royal member, he receives an education in the Royal Court of Egypt.

The princely position bestowed upon him restricts him from exploring the real world outside the palace. This bounded environment develops a crisis of identity in him. Though he is aware of his Hebrew identity, his princely position prevents him from reaching out to the oppressed Hebrew people. He could not stay indifferent to the sufferings of his people, which resulted in the development of a sense of unrest in him. His life in the court of Pharaoh for forty years correlates with the first stage of Bildungsroman, as it begins as an innocent and inexperienced child growing into a displaced adult.

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (Exod. 2:11,12)

The second stage of Bildungsroman initiates with a crisis that forces the protagonist to leave behind the known environment. This interruption is the result of a personal conflict or a social injustice that makes existence in the familiar world impossible. Eventually, the protagonist departs and embarks on a journey both externally and internally. The external journey reflects the protagonist's internal journey, which he embarks on in search of meaning and identity. The alienation becomes the key indicator of the stage. Disconnection from the accustomed setting catalyzes the transformation process in the protagonist.

The sense of unrest caused by Moses's identity crisis makes him unable to tolerate seeing an Egyptian taskmaster abusing an Israelite. Moses responds to the situation by killing the Egyptian. Fearing the consequences, he flees to an unknown land called Midian. In this new land, he marries the daughter of a Midian priest and earns his

living tending his flock. His estranged self in the wilderness of Midian, for forty years, sheds his princely garments and adopts shepherd's humility, preparing for the divine calling. His rebellious trait gets subdued, and he begins to accept the new changes in his life without trying to alter them. It is evident from the following verses:

Moses agreed to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage. Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land." (Exod. 2:21,22)

The third stage of the Bildungsroman plays a vital role in the character arc's transition. It is during this stage that the protagonist faces trials and undergoes intellectual, moral, and psychological growth. He encounters challenges such as failures, betrayals, responsibilities, and temptations, which act as tests of resilience and adaptability. The key feature of this stage is that wisdom is imparted to the protagonist through a mentor who guides him or her toward a full understanding of selfhood.

The divine encounter amid the burning bush on Mount Horeb is considered the turning point in the life of Moses, which inspires Moses to embark on a journey to Egypt with his brother Aaron to deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh's rule. Many biblical scholars and researchers have observed this life episode of Moses to be a most defining moment that ignited his spiritual awakening and intensified his inclination toward God. Steinmetz notes in the abstract that "Moses' 'Revelation' on Mount Horeb can be read as a near-death experience",

Moses, the leader and lawgiver to the people of Israel, went through a metamorphosis during his stay in the Sinai Desert, which can be explained as a near-death or near-death-like experience. Moses saw and heard God in the burning bush and yet survived. Following his revelation, he reached a higher level of consciousness, which enabled personality changes to occur. From being a simple shepherd of his father-in-law's flock, he turned into a prophet and charismatic leader of his people. (Steinmetz, *Abstract*)

Upon learning of Moses's mission, the Israelites hail him as a hero, which spurs him to confront Pharaoh. Unfortunately, Moses's confidence shatters when he witnesses Pharaoh's wrath, which results in the Israelites facing even harsher labor. The people who once exalted Moses for his mission now blame him for their misfortune.

Then the Israelite overseers went and appealed to Pharaoh: "Why have you treated your servants this way? Your servants are given no straw, yet we are told, 'Make bricks!' Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people." Pharaoh said, "Lazy, that's what you are—lazy! That is why you keep saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks." . . . When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hands to kill us." (Exod. 5:15-21)

The betrayal by the people causes intense psychological suffering in Moses; when human connections fail him, he seeks connection with God, who can be seen as a mentor through the lens of a Bildungsroman. Throughout the Book of Exodus, we see the many roles God plays in Moses' life—as an Instructor, Counselor, Teacher, Disciplinarian, Enabler, Protector, Deliverer, and Sustainer—helping him realize his life's purpose. The different roles God fulfills in Moses' life have a profound impact, transforming him from a reluctant shepherd into a visionary leader.

Throughout his challenging journey of leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, Moses faces countless physical, psychological, and spiritual struggles over forty years. These include confronting Pharaoh's resistance and his hardened heart, enduring plagues, navigating the Red Sea, dealing with his people's complaints, and providing food and water in the wilderness. With God's interference, these challenges continue

to foster his growth rather than weaken him. Even when Aaron and Miriam, the siblings of Moses, rebel against him, fueled by jealousy, the Lord God of Israel sides with Moses and chides them, saying,

Listen to my words: “When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” The anger of the Lord burned against them, . . . (Exod. 12:6-8)

The final stage of the Bildungsroman framework is the culmination of the protagonist's reconciliation with themselves and their society. The endurance of the protagonist, reflected in the process of alienation and persecution, has shaped him or her into a better personality. The state of maturity is marked by a clear awareness that comes with prioritizing the communal responsibilities over his desires. The attainment of ultimate wisdom and stability often involves sacrificing self-centered desires and dreams. The seminal essence of this stage lies in the transformation and growth of the protagonist's inner potential.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the last book of Torah, Moses is portrayed as a sagacious leader imparting wisdom on the essential elements of God's power, God's promise, and God's Covenant to the young Israelites. Moses, once perceived as a susceptible and impulsive figure, striking an Egyptian in a fit of anger, now emerges as a humble and selfless leader, proffering counsel to the next generation. Standing at the threshold of the Promised Land, he manages to veil his disappointment at not entering the covenant land despite leading the people in the wilderness for forty years. This act of equanimity expresses his attainment of self-actualization, marked by his willingness to give precedence to communal responsibilities over his self-desires.

Conclusion:

This research aimed to apply the Bildungsroman, a narrative model that traces the transformative character arc of the protagonist in the biblical account. The application of this model to the life narrative of Moses highlights the progression map of his character from a predisposed state to that of a prudent counselor through implicit analysis. The study confirms that Moses' character development aligns with the four archetypal stages of Bildungsroman. It also aids us in understanding the protagonist's gradual transition in his moral, psychological, and intellectual paradigms. The application of this model to the scriptural narrative also broadens the horizons of the life-trajectory narrative in the realm of research.

Works Cited:

- Burch, Colin Foote. “Martin Luther Wanted as Many Poets and Writers as Possible.” *Liturgical*, 4 May 2010, <https://liturgical.wordpress.com/2010/05/04/martin-luther-wanted-as-many-poets-and-writers-as-possible/>. Accessed 23 Aug. 2025.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Translated by Eric A. Blackall, Penguin Classics, 2009.
- *The Holy Bible*. New International Version, Zondervan, 2011.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

- House, Paul R. *Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama*. Almond Press, 1988. *Epdf*, <https://epdf.pub/zephaniah-a-prophetic-drama-bible-and-literature-series.html>. Accessed 23 Aug. 2025.
- Short, Fay, and Phil Thomas. *Core Approaches in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Taylor & Francis, 2014.
- Steinmetz, Dov. “Moses' ‘Revelation’ on Mount Horeb as a Near-Death Experience.” *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, vol. 11, 1993, pp. 199–203. *Springer*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01078237>. Accessed [23 Aug.2025].