

*Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*

Stella Bolaki

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The *Bildungsroman* came of age in the nineteenth century as a Western genre suited to the “civilizing” projects of its time. Since the “maturation” and “development” of protagonists implied successful social integration, the genre came to be associated with processes of assimilation, acculturation, and conformity. But throughout the twentieth century the so-called “novel of education” was challenged on all fronts. Critics debated the genre’s heuristic value, its conceptual boundaries, its political function, and its allegiance to hegemonic identities. Denigrated or discounted at once for its ideological closure and its ambivalence, the *Bildungsroman* also inspired renewed interest. Contemporary critics set it in conversation with other literary models and challenged its traditional thematic and formal conventions. Feminist, postcolonial, and immigrant literatures forged new ties to the genre, adapting it to suit diverse contexts and ideologies and “unsettling” a genre that had long confounded critics.

It is with an eye on this shifting terrain that Stella Bolaki’s *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction* argues for the “novel of formation” as a potentially oppositional and even subversive form. Acknowledging competing assertions about the genre’s “notoriously slippery” conceptual borders as well as its “reactionary closure,” Bolaki argues for an approach that sees all genres “as constructions whose literary and social functions change depending on who defines them and when” (10). Investigating interactions between the *Bildungsroman* and writing by Chicano, Asian American, African American, and Afro-Caribbean literary traditions, Bolaki’s analysis approaches the genre as a “sociohistorically contingent condition rather than a logical telos” (19). Her study contributes to a growing body of literary and critical work that aims to challenge the very boundary formation processes at the core of the genre.

In particular, Bolaki calls attention to the ways in which ethnic women writers problematize the American “coming-of-age” formula and its accompanying myths. The study is divided into four main sections, focusing on texts by Jamaica Kincaid, Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Audre Lorde, respectively. The works Bolaki examines situate ethnic protagonists within familiar cultural narratives (the American Dream, mobility, freedom, individuality) and draw on the tropes and themes of the *Bildungsroman*. But Bolaki reads these texts in the

context of the *Bildungsroman* to reveal a kind of “resistant translation” that redefines “what it means to be or to become ‘American’” (21).

In her introduction, Bolaki provides an overview of concerns involving the genre’s instability as well as its traditionally conservative bent. Despite postmodern challenges to the idea of a coherent subject and the historical “baggage” attached to the genre, Bolaki contends that the “hybrid space of the *Bildungsroman* offers an appropriate site for the negotiation of a number of enduring and contentious tensions in ethnic American writing” (11). She aims to “reframe and multiply the sites of tension between individual desire and the demands of socialization” (11), rejecting the notion that reading ethnic American and postcolonial texts in the context of the *Bildungsroman* subsumes their specifics of time and place into a universalizing or Eurocentric framework.

Bolaki sets her volume in dialogue with relevant theoretical issues concerning subjectivity, agency, and the body, noting the interplay between ethnic American novels of development and a variety of current theoretical perspectives. Specifically, each chapter introduces a theoretical or conceptual framework, then organizes discussion around key tropes and themes: trauma and mobility in Kincaid’s *Lucy* and *At the Bottom of the River*; hybridity and border spaces in *The House on Mango Street*; translation in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*; the aesthetics of embodiment and disability/illness in Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, *The Cancer Journals*, and “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer.” The analyses build on the notion that the *Bildungsroman* is “the story of a cultural moment” (Fraiman 144), exploring the ways that these authors position ethnic American female protagonists within multiple and often competing communities and subject positions.

Coming-of-age as women of color in these texts and in this cultural moment involves not only challenging false dichotomies (past/present, mobility/trauma, native/foreign) or resisting oppressive boundaries, but also constructing “hybrid spaces and borderland subjectivities” (15). Against an American tradition of future-oriented, individualistic prototypes, Bolaki posits ethnic female protagonists whose “*Bildung*” processes weave familial, historical, and political elements into a contemporary American reality. In Bolaki’s reading of Kincaid’s *Lucy*, for example, the titular protagonist’s passionate but traumatic relationship with her mother signals complex interconnections between past and present, Antigua and America, a colonial past and neocolonial present. Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, written as a series of vignettes, reveals a cast of women longing to escape the confines of *barrio*, family and community. But as ethnic *Bildungsroman*, *The House on Mango Street* accommodates diverse affiliations and loyalties, transcending “unnatural boundaries” predicated “on individualism and community as mutually exclusive” (94). These “border crossings” assume linguistic and cultural significance in *The Woman Warrior*, as Kingston’s protagonist engages in an act of *resistant translation*: the pattern of progression customary in the *Bildungsroman* here refuses to leave the past safely

behind. Chinese ghosts, myths, and memories disrupt the narrator's "Americanization" tale, forging a "composite song that 'translated well'" (182) and gesturing toward a more dynamic model of belonging. Similarly, Lorde's "body *Bildung*" multiplies the axes of belonging. Told from the perspective of a black, lesbian, disabled woman, Lorde's *Bildungsroman*, Bolaki argues, "challenges the socially integrative purpose" of the genre and launches a powerful critique of assimilation and normalcy (30).

Fredric Jameson contends that literary genres are "experimental constructs" (145) which are constantly being renegotiated by new works that come into contact with them. But how much "unsettling" can a genre take before it becomes, to use Marc Redfield's words, a "phantom genre," a construct subject to fleeting ideological or critical currents? Bolaki's volume suggests that much is at stake in the struggle to register and enforce generic boundaries. At the same time, her "unsettling" of the *Bildungsroman* gives voice to other ways of imagining the self, other processes of "becoming." In doing so, Bolaki reaffirms the *Bildungsroman*'s enduring viability, versatility, and socio-political function at this cultural moment in American literary history. This is an important task at a time when "being American" so often involves building walls, closing borders, and policing the bodies of others.

#### Works Cited

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