

Female Bildungsroman: The Transition from Girlhood to Womanhood in Chingiz Aitmatov's *The First Teacher*

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Abstract

Bildungsroman or the Formation Novel traces the development of the protagonist from childhood to womanhood. Education is part of the child's maturation and preparation for the impending adulthood. Chingiz Aitmatov is an emblematic and prolific Kirghiz writer. The paper examines Aitmatov's *My First Teacher* as a female Bildungsroman. It exposes the emotional paralysis and entrapment experienced by Altynai in the enclosed and bigoted setting of a small Kirghiz village Kurkureu. Aitmatov not only presents women as the victims of a patriarchal society subjected to the pressures of restrictive gendered expectations but also pronounces liberation for women through Duishen the teacher who initiates the empowerment of Altynai through imparting education.

Keywords: Bildung, Bildungsroman, Komsomol, Parochialism, Planetarity, Tokol

1. Introduction

Chingiz Aitmatov was a bilingual writer who authored his works in Russian and Kyrgyz languages. He placed Kyrgyzstan on the literary map of the world with his fictions like *Jamila*, *Farewell*, *Gulsary!* *The White Ship*, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, and *The Scaffold*. His obituary in *The New York Times* heralded him as, "a communist writer whose novels and plays before the collapse of the Soviet Union gave voice to the people of the remote Soviet Republic of Kyrgyz".

Gayathri Sпивак in her *Death of a Discipline* observes that Comparative Literature should give way from globalization to Planetarity and focus on literatures of Africa, Asia and Hispanic to explore and expose the various ethnic cultures of the world. This paper attempts to analyze the female Bildungsroman in Kyrgyz writer Aitmatov's short fiction *The First Teacher* also known with the title

Duishen. It was translated from Russian into English by Olga Shartse [1].

In Literary Criticism, a Bildungsroman or a novel of formation is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from girlhood to adulthood, leading to emotional and social maturity. Female Bildungsroman brings to the fore the difficulties of women in achieving maturation and inner development as they are constrained by the limitations inherent in being a female member in a patriarchal society.

2. Altynai's 'Education' or 'Bildung'

Aitmatov's *The First Teacher* is a story narrated in the first person by an adult woman Altynai who slides down memory lane and recounts her childhood years in Kurkureu, a

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Kirghiz countryside. Typical of the Bildungsroman plot, Altnai, a child of great sensibility grows in the country where she experiences constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. The important requirements for a novel of formation are that the child should be emotionally endowed, born and brought up in a rural area and feel that she is unable to express her talents freely. Altnai fulfills all the requirements as she is emotionally sensitive, grows up in Kurkureu and is unable to express herself freely. Her family is unimpressed by her ambition to attend school. She is an orphan and hails from a village fulfilling the norms of a Bildungsroman. She describes, "What is now our collective farm was in those days a small village of poor peasants. I was fourteen at that time, and I lived in the home of my late father's cousin. My mother, too, was dead" (FT6) [1].

Altnai's 'education' or 'Bildung' includes achievement of formal education and gaining of experiences in other areas of life. Labovitz claims, "every male hero of the Bildungsroman is guided by a mentor; something that the female heroine rarely acquires" [5]. But Altnai is blessed to find a mentor in Duishen, a Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth) member who starts a school to educate the children of the village. Altnai longs for brotherly affection and care which she finds in her teacher Duishen.

The villagers do not lend their support to establish a school. So Duishen displays the paper bearing the order of the Soviet Government to teach the children to read and write. When Duishen requests the villagers to provide their co-operation to repair the stable and build a bridge across the stream, Satymkul reprimands, "The state has money enough, just leave us in peace" (FT 8) [1] and refuses to lend any support to Duishen in his unflinching effort to establish a school. He feels it was the sole responsibility of the Government to fund all these activities. The other villagers too shirk of their duty of assisting Duishen, leaving him in a dismal and miserable state.

Altnai demonstrating her fine sensibility says, "I felt sorry for him and stood staring with dumb sympathy" (FT 8) [1]. Altnai is overwhelmed by his goodness and as a mark of her assistance she empties her bag of cow dung to add fuel to the school. She recalls, "perhaps it was sheer stubbornness, or an uncontrollable urge to rebel, having had all my impulses crushed since infancy with cruel cuffs and scolding; an urge to do something good for this man, a total stranger really, for his smile which warmed my heart, for trusting me if only a little, for saying those few kind words" (FT10) [1]. The path to self knowledge begins the

moment she decides to empty the bag of cow dung in the school.

According to Erikson, identity development is the result of the interplay between the biology, psychology and the social world [3]. Altnai elaborates, "For that was the first time in my life I did something on my own decision, something I considered right, without hesitation or fear of punishment" (FT 10) [1]. It was a personal victory for the girl, - "I ran heedlessly as if on wings, my heart beating happily, as if I had just performed some wonderful feat" (FT 10). Her penchant to have formal education is reflected in her words, "Look at me! See how proud I am? I'm going to study; I shall go to school and bring others there" (FT 11) [1]. Erikson in his clarifies, "childhood as a gradual unfolding of the personality through phase-specific psychosocial crises" [3]. Erikson in his *Youth and Crisis* elucidates Crisis as, "a 'turning point' a period of both vulnerability and potential for growth" [4].

Altnai's aunt is furious that she intends to attend the school. She scowls and proclaims that her legs would be broken if she enters the school. The girl children were constrained by the society to have any access to education. So Duishen uses the law of the country to threaten the aunt but the uncle intercedes and silences the aunt. The uncle fearing the consequences of violating the law, grants permission to Altnai to attend the school. Lenin's picture in the classroom assures the children of a beautiful future. Duishen taught the Kirghiz children letters and numerals with sincere enthusiasm that gave them a glimpse of the new world.

Altnai was eager to learn and had great veneration for Duishen. When he was away to submit the progress report of the children in the regional centre, Altnai longed for, "his smile that warmed the heart and to hear his words that brought enlightenment" (FT 14) [1]. She treasured the notebook he had given and trained herself by writing the letters on the ground with the tip of the sickle, on the mud walls with a bit of charcoal, on the snow and in the dust of the twig.

Duishen articulates his dream of sending Altnai to a school in town. She is overjoyed by the affection of her master and prays the Lord to make him her big brother. The death of Lenin forces Duishen to be away from the village for three days. The icy cold weather forebodes a disaster and the wolves had become a menace. Altnai is anxious and worried about his well being. Saikal and Kartanbai, distant relatives of Altnai had rented their house to Duishen. Duishen is chased by a pack of wolves but he has a miraculous escape. Altnai sheds tears of joy on witnessing Duishen.

3. The Objection to Education

Spring season follows which was the first spring of her maidenhood. She enjoys the fun of playing games but her aunt resents it. Time and again she admonishes her for attending the school. This is another characteristic of Bildungsroman fiction where the family objects to the formal education of the protagonist and the aunt resolves to arrange for her marriage. She bellows “other girls of your age have long been married; they’ve brought more relatives into their families, and you...some pastime, going to school! Never mind, I’ll fix you yet...” (FT 21) [1].

The aunt fixes the marriage of Altynai though her daughter was older than Altynai. Saikal objects to this but the aunt ignores Saikal. Duishen rescues her and safeguards her in Saikal’s house. He infuses courage and confidence in her. In order to rejuvenate her spirit he makes her plant two Poplar saplings. He reassures her, “As they grow and gain strength, you too will grow up into a splendid woman. You have a good heart and an inquisitive mind. You’ll become a scholar; I’m convinced it will be so; you’ll see you’re destined to be a scholar” (FT 23) [1].

Altynai is moved by his kindness and wants to confess, “Teacher, thank you for being what you are...I want to embrace you and kiss you” (FT 24)[1]. Her respect for her master has blossomed into love but she does not have the courage to divulge it. The protagonist experiencing love is part of the Bildungsroman and Altynai enjoys platonic love which ennobles and elevates her mind. Bakhtin opines, “in the Bildungsroman the protagonist is no longer “ready-made and unchanging” [2].

The next day the aunt arrives with three men to carry away Altynai. Duishen is terribly injured in the scuffle and Altynai is abducted on horseback. When Altynai awakes she finds herself in a yurt and her husband rapes her. Altynai was just fifteen and was younger than her seducer’s daughter. Bertrand Russell in “Marriages and Morals” explicates, “Marriage is for woman the commonest mode of livelihood, and the total amount of undesired sex endured by women is probably greater in marriage than in prostitution [7]” and Altynai is forced to endure this abominable condition of slavery.

4. The Delimiting Role of Matrimony

Aitmatov reiterates that family is the framework which perpetuates conventional gendered roles. Matrimony is portrayed as a prison for women, an institution which

delimits their freedom and determines their lives of submission and service. Altynai observes that the first wife of the seducer was a snag and did not utter a word, “was she dumb perhaps? Her eyes, dead as cold ashes, stared dully, expressing nothing. There are dogs like that, beaten into submission as pups. Their cruel masters hit them on the head with anything handy, and gradually the dogs grow used to it, but a dumbness so hopeless, so vacuous comes into their eyes” (FT 26) [1] which elucidates the predicament of wives who are subjugated by the male partner.

Altynai determines to escape from the entangled relationship. Bakhtin elaborates, “The Bildungsroman projects people as living and changing in time. It variegates that people are many sided and complex, they have psychological depth and their psychology and identity are capable of undergoing real change” [2]. She firmly determines to escape from the place, “to die in freedom, if I die I must, to die fighting, but never submit” (FT 27) [1]. She is a *tokol*- a concubine and loathes the word:

Oh! How I hate that word! Who, in what rotten times had invented it? What can be more humiliating than being a second wife, a slave in body and soul? Rise from your graves, you poor women! Ghosts of all those raped, sullied women, deprived of human dignity, rise! Rise, martyrs, and make the old, hideously dark world quake! It is I who am calling you, I, the last of you, I who have suffered this fate and defied it! (FT 27) [1].

The next day Altynai and the nomadic tribes are getting ready to migrate from that place. She sees three men approaching them and one is Duishen. Duishen with the help of the militia men liberates her from the clutches of the barbaric husband. The liberation of Altynai is enabled by Duishen who initiates her empowerment. Aitmatov critiques the rigid parochialism which oppresses the female gender. But ironically the oppressed women are redeemed by another member of the male community.

Aitmatov presents Altynai’s husband as the masculine archetype of being violent, callous, treacherous, and lazy and also incompetent. But he also breaks the conventional masculine archetype by presenting Duishen as responsible, selfless, committed, sensitive, caring, and active and also competent. He sacrifices his life for his Soviet ideology of transforming the society through education. He becomes the mentor of Altynai and instructs her to wash away all her filth and dirt by bathing in the river. Plunging into the river gives her the feeling of being purged, “Oh! River, carry away the filth and ugliness of

those three days! Oh! Water; make me as clean as you are!”(FT 29) [1].

5. Relocation - A Bildungsroman Tradition

Altynai's future is mapped by her educator Duishen. Bildungsroman fiction illustrates the declining role of family but portrays the increasing importance of relationship voluntarily formed based on mutual feelings rather than obligation. She replaces her uncaring and unloving family with Duishen who provides the love and warmth expected from a family. Following the tradition of Bildungsroman, Altynai leaves her native place to Tashkent to gain new experience. She leaves her familiar environment and steps into the world to construct her own identity.

James Marcia proclaims, “Separating oneself from embeddedness in a relational matrix is a necessity for psychological development. Psychological development includes the establishment and maintenance of interdependent relational matrices” [6]. The parting words of Altynai's tutor was “Be happy, Altynai. And study hard, study, that's the main thing” (FT 29) [1]. Altynai successfully completes her school education and is sent to Moscow.

The tedium of learning dissuades her but only the memories of Duishen sustain her to pursue her studies. Through her years of study she realizes her love for Duishen and sends a letter expressing her love for him which is never reciprocated by him. Her first degree is conferred on her in Moscow and becomes an academician. The Bildungsroman focuses on the ordinary, everyday life, and presents people as interesting. The protagonists relentlessly move in the direction of personal fulfillment. Altynai has rewritten her destiny of being a concubine and has accomplished the task of becoming an academician.

6. The Happy Return

Altynai after long years visits her village and is elated to see the Poplars swaying gently in the breeze. But Duishen had been enlisted and was fighting in the war. Like Shelley's West Wind the Poplars were proclaiming the message, “yes, there will be winter, there will be cold, there will be snowstorms, but then there will be spring again....” (FT 31) [1]. Soon Altynai receives the grim news of Duishen being included in the list of missing soldiers. Altynai aggrieved a lot and her unfathomable grief culminates in a bout of

despondency. But Altynai recuperates from this shell shock and begins to focus on her personal achievement. She emerges victoriously in the process of carving a niche for herself in the social world and is duly acknowledged also.

Altynai is on a scientific mission to Tomsk and on the way she sees the figure of Duishen and applies the emergency brake and runs towards him. She is terribly disappointed as she has mistaken a stranger to be Duishen. Her fellow passengers understand her angst and console her. She accepts the reality that she would never meet Duishen again; she marries very late in life and is blessed with a child.

Altynai visits Kurkureu on the request of the villagers to honor the proud daughter of their village. Altynai gets the shock of her life when she sees Duishen alive and still unmarried. James Marcia adds, “Human development is an ongoing dialectic between connection and separation, between relatedness and solitude. Any portrayal of the human condition of identity that overlooks either pole shows us only half the picture” [6]. She is overcome by remorse. She regrets that the love and respect were wrongly showered on her by the villagers instead of on Duishen. So she leaves the village abruptly but pens down her life to reveal to the world the sacrifice of the first communist in their village - Duishen.

7. Conclusion

The identity of the Bildungsroman protagonist starts with liberation or freedom. Altynai is liberated from her cruel relatives and enforced marriage by her mentor Duishen. Her enriching experiences shape her identity and the process ends with the establishments of commitments and social and personal bonds. Though the family is presented as a declining force, at the end Aitmatov ascertains the positive value of family. Bildungsroman genre insists on the freedom of the individuals by marking the protagonists as orphans, and sends them out to be shaped and molded, and finally to find themselves through others. True freedom is found in belonging and the self is found through the other as Altynai's identity formation is achieved through Duishen.

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