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REINVENTION OF BILDUNGSROMAN IN POST COLONIAL FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Linda Henderson Hogan is a contemporary American Indian fiction writer, playwright and environmental activist. Her second novel *Solar Storms* (1995) is focused on Native American communities and their connection to nature, spirituality, and environmental activism. This critique aims at exploring Hogan's use of Post Colonial Bildungsroman genre in constructing her protagonist's Native American identity. My argument is that Postcolonial version of Bildungsroman has been the chosen genre of many postcolonial novelists to discuss the issues like identity, race, and trauma. Its practice by these writers reflects a surge towards indigenesness, selfdom and the effort to express resentment for British imperialism.

The analysis of the novel aims to bring out the uniqueness of the postcolonial Bildungsroman and its link with identity formation in the works of non-Western /non European writers. When dealing with Bildungsroman the paper focuses on the reinvention of the traditional Bildungsroman and its wider implications by the subaltern fiction writers. In the beginning a brief comparison of the traditional Bildungsroman and its postcolonial version will be presented. Finally *Solar Storms*, a novel by a non-Western fiction writer will be analyzed to conclude how this genre has been used to discuss the issue of identity in postcolonial fiction .

**Key Words:** Bildungsroman, postcolonial, identity, Native American, *Solar Storms*

Introduction

Bildungsroman is a novelistic genre. The word comes from German, meaning 'novel of formation', 'novel of education' or 'coming-of-age novel'. Literary critic M. H. Abrams states that Bildungsroman illustrates the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences- and often through a spiritual crisis- into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world.(193) The origins of this genre can be traced back to eighteenth century Germany. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796) is widely considered to be the first formation novel.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis of the earliest works reveals that the novel of growing up and coming to an awareness of who one is, was called the Bildungsroman. Martin Swales in his book *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* points out that the German novels which concern themselves with the growth and change of a young man through adolescence and which take this period as precisely the one in which decisive intellectual and philosophical issues are embedded in the psychological process of human self discovery are the ones

which are usually characterized as the Bildungsroman. Jerome Hamilton Buckley while tracing the development of British Bildungsroman in *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* argues that “the Bildungsroman in its pure form has been defined as a “novel of all around development or self-culture” with a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience” (p 13).

The first edition of Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* appeared in English translation in 1987.<sup>2</sup>In this far-reaching study Moretti argues that Bildungsroman emerged as a literary genre in its own right during a pivotal period in which Europe was passing into modernity and concepts of youth were evolving. Youthfulness projected the same images as modernity; mobility and inner restlessness. This genre came to symbolize modernity, which was metaphorically represented by the character of youth. Youth is not everlasting, but a transitional period of growth from childhood to adulthood that ends with a final and stable identity.( p 5-8)

However, the form of the Bildungsroman has changed over time. It has been reinvented upon its encounter with the predominant issues of post colonialism, such as identity, race, sovereignty, decolonization, nation, violence, and trauma. Tobias Boes in *Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends* claims that with the explosion of Bildungsroman writing in post-colonial and minority literatures of the late twentieth century, critics have begun to reconceptualize the modernist era as a period of transition from metropolitan, nationalist discourses to post-colonial and post-imperial ones.(240).

In the past few decades especially the writers from the former British colonies have used this novel to reveal the effects of British imperialism in their writings. Their texts present their protagonist’s maturity deeply anchored in the effects of British colonization. In traditional Bildungsroman novel hero or heroine attains maturity by establishing a certain practical accommodation between himself/herself and the social world around. The growth results from the rambling self understanding rather than from the events experienced in the journey towards a stable self.

However, it is not surprising that when the postcolonial novelists needed a genre to define the birth of their nations and to highlight their experiences in relation to , they chose Bildungsroman or the novel of formation to signify their nationhood.<sup>3</sup> Most of the postcolonial Bildungsroman portray indigenous or subaltern subjects as their protagonists and the process of Bildung, the protagonist’s decisive passage towards self-formation is perturbed. The maturity is concealed in the effects of colonialism that the protagonist experiences rather than in the understanding and absorption of the events of colonization and culture contact. Tobias Boes notices a growing trend concerning the Bildungsroman as one of the most salient genres for postcolonial fiction, he writes:

“During the past few years, attention within twentieth-century Bildungsroman studies has increasingly shifted towards post-colonial and minority writing. As a result, it has become obvious that the critical commonplace of a decline of the genre during the modernist period is a myopic illusion. In reality, the novel of formation continues to thrive in post-colonial, minority, multi-cultural, and immigrant literatures worldwide”. (240)

Although Bildungsroman has its origins in a national tradition, but the historical record suggests that in the recent past it has been used to discuss the cultural and global issues. The continual adaptability of the traditional Bildungsroman highlights its flexibility and perhaps this is the reason that nowadays it has been the most preferred genre to discuss the postcolonial concerns .Commenting on the practice of Bildungsroman genre Feroza Jussawala observes:

“The Bildungsroman originally a German, nationalist genre, as used by postcolonial novelists to show the growth of a young protagonist into nationalist, anti-colonial sentiments is the form that helps define the true characteristics of what constitutes Postcoloniality in a work of literature. The most important component, however, is that the growth defined is not just anti-colonial but is towards indigenouness in language, style, religious roots and belonging”.(25)

The characteristics of the traditional Bildungsroman are adapted to postcolonial histories and the coming-of-age narratives from non-European and subaltern cultures differ in form from the traditional Bildungsroman. The journey of growth and self-discovery are engaged with experiences of colonialism. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson agree that there are instances of 'contemporary postcolonial writers employing the form to typically reshape the story of education as one of becoming alienated subjects of double legacies in ways that interrogate the form's ideology of development, self-determination, and incorporation of citizens into the new nation'.(5) Novels such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* demonstrate that the form can be adapted to suit modernist and post-modernist themes of race, identity and trauma. Claudine Raynaud notes that:

"Coming of age—reaching the age of "maturity" or "discretion" – is variously a process, a moment, or a scene akin to the structural "scenes of instruction" inherent in African American narratives . . . The discovery of American society's racism is the major event in the protagonist's development and in his "education."  
(106)

### **Solar Storms: A Postcolonial Bildungsroman**

Linda Hogan as a writer benefits from her mixed origin which gives a dual perspective to her writings. She was born in Denver to her Chickasaw father and white Pennsylvania Dutch mother. Her family background gave her an access to both worlds; the dominant Euro-American society's culture as well as the American Indian culture. *Solar Storms* is the story of Angela Jensen, a troubled 17-year-old girl, who returns to Adam's Rib, an island town in the boundary waters between Minnesota and Canada and inhabited by Native Americans. The novel opens with Angela's arrival at her native town. She comes to live with her grandmother after a gap of many years. In her childhood she was separated from her mother at the hands of a case-worker and since then she had lived with different Euro American foster parents in Oklahoma.

However, she could not establish any spiritual relationship with those families not belonging to her tribe. She grew up into a broken soul in search of the meaning of her existence. She becomes desperate to unveil the truth about her hazy past. Earlier in the novel she states: "As young as I was, I felt I had already worn out all the possibilities in my life". (Hogan 27)

Until that moment in Angela's life, two emotions, fear and anger, are her only certainties. She can't help losing temper and getting irritable. This is the reason that she leaves the home of her Euro-American foster parents and reaches her native town, Adam Ribs to live with her great-grand mother, Agnes. Her arrival follows the narrative of how Angela's investment in her Native community changes her perspective on life; it uncovers her intellectual, moral, and psychological development. Her return to her native town inhabited by Native Americans begins her journey towards fulfillment and self-confidence. "It was 1972 and I was traveling toward myself, coming home to a place where I'd lived as an infant, returning to people I'd never met." (Hogan 29) She wants answers. "I wanted to talk to her but I did not know what to say. I was full of words inside myself; there were even questions in me I had not yet thought to form, things not yet come towards. (Hogan 25)

It's her return, the reconnection with her family which results in her new beginning. She starts sensing a radical change in her restless soul right after her arrival.

"My return was uneventful, dull and common...it was my first step into a silence, into what I feared. I could have turned back. I wanted to. But I felt that I was at the end of something. Not just my fear and anger, not even forgetfulness, but at the end of a way of living in the world. I was at the end of my life in one America, and a secret part of me knew this end was also a beginning, as if something has shifted right then and there, turned over in me. It was a felt thing, that I was traveling toward myself like rain falling into a lake." (Hogan 25-26, )

Reconnecting with her tribe serves to structure Angel's ways of knowing more than all the years she spent going from one foster home to the next. Indeed, Angela's change is deeply anchored within communal bonds that she discovers as she connects to Agnes, Dora Rogue and Bush. She begins to let go of an anger that she kept repressed for a very long time, and attempts to move on with her life.

"I began to see...that there were three women and myself, all of us on some

kind of journey out of the narrowed circle of our history, the way rays of light grow from the sun. Only a month earlier I knew none of these women, or even that they existed, and now our lives were bound together (in truth as they had been already) by blood and history, love and hate". (Hogan 93)

Angela's change is a psychological one that allows her to understand her traumatic history. In addition to a new beginning, this movement toward selfhood signals a pivotal moment in Angela's development. She gets back to life. "I could see in the dark. My fingers grew longer, more sensitive. My eyes saw new and other things. My ears heard everything that moved beyond the walls. I could see with my skin, touch with my eyes." (Hogan 120).

Before returning to Adam's Rib Angela hated her scarred face and "lived " inside Herself. She was reluctant to face people and always tried to hide her face by covering it with her red hair. She was told that it was her mother who brutally scarred her face. In her reunion with her mother, Hannah ,she gets insight into the truth. She learns that her face is an embodiment of the mistreatment of the entire community of Native people at the hands of Euro -Americans. She discovers why a mother went mad to deface her daughter, and that her mother, Hannah Wing was also a victim of her mother, Lorreta's brutality, and Lorreta herself had been a terrible victim of mistreatment at the hands of the European settlers. Loretta's specific traumatic experiences, her traumatic encounters with colonizers of her land made her a psychopath, feared even by her own community:

"The curse on that poor girl's [Loretta] life came from watching the desperate people of her tribe die...How she'd lived, I didn't know. But after that, when she was still a girl she'd been taken and used by men who fed her and beat her and used her. That was how one day she became the one who hurt others. It was passed down. I could almost hear their voices when she talked, babbling behind hers, men's voices speaking English. Something scary lived behind her voice...There was no love left in her.

There was no belief. Not a bit of conscience. There wasn't anything left in her". (Hogan 39)

The trauma of Loretta affected her daughter, Hannah. Angela learns, "Loretta was sold into sickness and prostitution, and those things followed Hannah into dark, dark places." (Hogan 119) Bush tells about Hannah, "She was a body under siege when I saw her in her small nakedness, I stopped and stared. Beneath all the layers of clothes, her skin was a garment of scars. There were burns and incisions." (Hogan 99 ) Both Loretta and Hannah's corrupted bodies are signs of a collective trauma, one that damaged not only their own bodies but also the generations to follow.

Angela realizes why her mother, herself a victim of violence, in turn, brutally transposed that aggression onto her own daughter, giving birth to another "body under siege" (Hogan 99). Hannah "knew the wound and how it was passed on, the infinite nature of wounding." (Hogan 94). She subjected her daughter to extreme violence because she hated her as being part of her agonized self. Bush reveals the mystery of Angel's scarred face by telling, "We knew what happened to you, your face, how, like a dog, she bit your face with her teeth. It was worse for you, may be because you looked like her. She hated you for that, for coming from her body, being part of her." (Hogan 246).

The reconnection of Angela with her Native kin allows her to understand the exploitation of her ancestors at the hands of colonizers. Despite the painful memories, Angela attains a new beginning to the end of her journey. Angela ultimately becomes an accomplished mature woman by the end of her quest for origins. At the death of Hannah Wing, she feels:

"It was death, finally, that allowed me to know my mother, her body, the house of lament and sacrifice that it was. I was no longer a girl. I was a woman, full and alive. After that, I made up my mind to love in whatever ways I could. I would find it in myself to love the woman who had given life to me". (Hogan 250).

Having attained maturity, Angela forgives her mother and includes her death in the long list of wrongs sustained by her kinfolk. She decides to protect her half-sister, Aurora, from getting contaminated by the inherited trauma: "I wanted nothing to enter the innocent open-eyed gaze of this child. None of the soul stealers were going to sing this one away or fill her body with emptiness and pain." (Hogan 250) The troubled teenager finally grows into a woman warrior.

She joins resistance against the building of a dam by a hydroelectric company – a project that threatens not only her people but the tribal ways, land and animals. The reconnection with her Native kin allows her to understand the meaning of her existence. Angela, who finds herself uprooted in the beginning, now embraces her identity and kinfolk, realizing: "something beautiful lives inside us." (Hogan 351)

### Conclusion

Linda Hogan in *Solar Storms* uses Bildungsroman genre to give voice to the Native Americans. She portrays the story of Angela to articulate her concerns for her people. It is an attempt to permit the subaltern to speak. The first-person perspectives speak of the unspeakable and thereby unearth the traumatic history of the Native Americans. Hogan has depicted the impossibility of the growth of her displaced main character in the hegemonic and ethnocentric America, an environment that remains inadequate for the Native heroine to progress. Angela's departure to reconnect with her mother, people and land, her stay among the Native Americans, her recovery of past memories, attempts to formulate a more integral sense of her 'self' while being part of her community, and finally the achievement of a more thorough sense of self with roots in Native American identity, are features of Postcolonial Bildungsroman.

The homing plot of *Solar Storms* is contrasted with the "leaving plots" of traditional Bildungsroman, in which the protagonist goes West in search for fresh beginnings. In contrast Angel returns to her mother, grandmother and great-grand-mother, to the land, and to the stories that help shape her. Her bonds with her foremothers instill in her the strength of not only accepting her childhood events but also get over them. She is healed from chronic feelings of shame and also re-appropriates her connection to her ancestral land. One of the remarkable facets of Angela's personality, as she matures, is that she conjugates her reverence towards her people's world with the observation of impropriety of materially-oriented Western ways.

### End Notes

1. M.H. Abrams. *A Glossary of the Literary Terms*, p.121.
2. See Tobias Boes' *Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends. Literature Compass* 3.2 (2006): p.236
3. FerozaJussawalla, .Kim, Huck and Naipaul: Using The Postcolonial Bildungsroman to (Re)define Postcoloniality:*Links&Letters*4. 1997. p.5-6

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