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THE FORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROTAGONIST IN AMAL UNBOUND BY AISHA SAEED: A BILDUNGSROMAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the character development of Amal, the protagonist in Aisha Saeed's *Amal Unbound* (2018), through the theoretical framework of the Bildungsroman. Traditionally rooted in European literary traditions, the Bildungsroman—defined as a coming-of-age narrative focusing on the psychological, moral, and intellectual maturation of a central character—has historically centered on young male protagonists navigating personal conflicts within a broader social context. However, in recent decades, the genre has evolved to include marginalized voices, particularly those of women, postcolonial subjects, and socioeconomically oppressed individuals, who challenge dominant narratives of development and identity formation. By applying this adapted Bildungsroman lens to *Amal Unbound*, a novel set in rural Pakistan, this study explores the multi-layered development of a young Muslim girl whose growth is shaped not only by personal aspirations but also by the constraints of a deeply patriarchal and feudal society. Amal's journey—marked by her initial idealism, forced servitude, moral awakening, and eventual resistance—demonstrates how coming-of-age narratives in postcolonial contexts are intrinsically political. Her transformation is not solely an inward, psychological evolution but also a form of social resistance against systemic injustices such as gender inequality, illiteracy, and class exploitation. Furthermore, the paper situates Amal's development within feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, emphasizing the role of education, mentorship, and moral agency in her resistance to oppression. Her story reflects a broader trend in South Asian literature where young female protagonists are depicted not as passive recipients of cultural norms but as active agents of change. Through Amal's progression from innocence to empowerment, the novel reimagines the Bildungsroman as a genre capable of embodying intersectional struggles and redefining what it means to come of age in a non-Western, gendered, and socially stratified world.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, *Amal Unbound*, Aisha Saeed, Female Protagonist, Identity Development, Coming-of-Age, Social Justice, Feminist Theory, Postcolonial Literature, South Asian Fiction

Introduction

The term *Bildungsroman*, or "novel of formation," refers to a literary genre that originated in late 18th-century Germany and typically follows the life trajectory of a young protagonist as they progress from childhood to psychological, moral, and often intellectual maturity. The genre is rooted in Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of individualism, personal growth, and rational progress. M. H. Abrams (1999) outlines the essential elements of the *Bildungsroman* as a movement from youthful idealism to disillusionment, followed by a reconciliation with society through the internalization of its norms and values. Franco Moretti (1987) further argues that the genre often serves as a "symbolic form" for

bourgeois culture, aligning the protagonist's journey with historical progress and social assimilation.

Classic *Bildungsroman* texts—such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795), Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)—are predominantly centered on white, male, European protagonists whose development reflects the philosophical and ideological currents of their respective societies. These narratives often privilege self-realization and personal ambition over collective or communal concerns. Consequently, the genre's early canon excluded marginalized voices, particularly women, colonized subjects, and those positioned outside the dominant class structures.

In contemporary literary criticism, particularly feminist and postcolonial theory, the *Bildungsroman* has been reinterpreted, deconstructed, and expanded to include a more diverse array of experiences. Susan Fraiman (1993) critiques the traditional *Bildungsroman* for its "male-centered narrative of individual development" and calls for "unbecoming" alternatives that prioritize fragmentation, resistance, and community over conformity. Similarly, postcolonial scholars argue that in contexts shaped by colonial histories and persistent systemic inequalities, the protagonist's development cannot be viewed in isolation from broader sociopolitical realities (Hirsch, 1989). In these adaptations, the protagonist's coming-of-age is frequently marked by oppression, displacement, and the struggle for agency—elements that are central to *Amal Unbound*.

Aisha Saeed's *Amal Unbound* (2018) represents a vital contribution to this expanded genre. The novel centers on Amal, a 12-year-old girl living in a rural Pakistani village, who aspires to become a teacher. Her love for literature and hunger for education signal her early intellectual and emotional depth. However, her trajectory is abruptly altered when she is forced into indentured servitude as retribution for a perceived insult to a powerful feudal landlord. This shift marks the protagonist's abrupt and traumatic confrontation with systemic injustice—a pivotal element in modern *Bildungsroman* narratives involving marginalized figures.

Unlike traditional European texts where the protagonist's conflict is often internal or philosophical, Amal's struggle is fundamentally structural. She faces the dual oppressions of gender and class in a society where female autonomy and literacy are not only undervalued but actively suppressed. Her transformation—from an innocent, curious schoolgirl to a morally aware, socially conscious agent of change—demonstrates a deeply political interpretation of the *Bildungsroman*. In this context, her *Bildung* (self-formation) is not merely about personal enlightenment but about resistance, collective empowerment, and moral courage. Amal's journey is thus situated at the intersection of several overlapping discourses: gender, class, postcolonialism, and youth

empowerment. Her development is shaped not by a linear quest for individual fulfillment, but by navigating a complex terrain of familial obligations, feudal exploitation, and cultural expectations. In choosing to expose the injustices of her oppressors, Amal engages in an act of ethical resistance that not only marks her own growth but also catalyzes transformation within her community.

Therefore, this paper proposes to examine Amal's developmental arc not only as a narrative of personal growth but as a radical reinterpretation of the *Bildungsroman*. It explores how Amal's voice—rooted in her identity as a rural, Muslim, South Asian girl—challenges the Eurocentric, patriarchal foundations of the genre and demands a reimagining of what it means to come of age in a world still riddled with inequality.

Literature Review

The *Bildungsroman*, as a genre, has undergone significant evolution since its inception in late 18th-century Europe. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) is often credited as the foundational text that codified the genre's characteristics: a young protagonist's journey from innocence to experience, personal development shaped by internal conflicts, and eventual reconciliation with social norms (Abrams, 1999; Moretti, 1987). Traditionally, the *Bildungsroman* has centered on white, male, middle-class protagonists navigating a relatively stable society that ultimately absorbs them after a period of maturation.

However, as literary scholarship diversified, particularly under the influence of feminist and postcolonial theory, critiques of the classic *Bildungsroman* began to emerge. Susan Fraiman (1993) argues that the genre's conventional arc marginalizes female development, portraying women's growth as either secondary or non-normative. She calls for a redefinition of the *Bildungsroman* that accounts for female protagonists whose development often involves resistance to, rather than reconciliation with, the social order. Similarly, Marianne Hirsch (1989) critiques the linear, teleological narrative structures that dominate traditional coming-of-age stories, especially in their failure to account for non-Western and non-male experiences of formation.

Postcolonial critics have further expanded the genre by exploring how colonial histories, cultural dislocation, and systemic inequality alter the dynamics of identity formation. Franco Moretti (1987) emphasizes that while the classic *Bildungsroman* is often complicit with bourgeois ideology, postcolonial versions transform the genre into a critique of dominant socio-political structures. In these narratives, protagonists often do not reconcile with the world as it is, but instead seek to change it.

This shift is particularly evident in South Asian literature, where authors increasingly utilize the *Bildungsroman* framework to articulate the intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and colonial legacy. For instance, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991) and Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002) both feature young

female protagonists navigating violent, fragmented political landscapes, using personal growth as a lens to critique societal dysfunction. These texts demonstrate a regional, feminist, and political expansion of the *Bildungsroman*, pushing the genre beyond its Eurocentric roots.

In *Amal Unbound* (2018), Aisha Saeed builds upon this legacy by crafting a protagonist whose coming-of-age journey occurs within a patriarchal and feudal Pakistani society. Unlike classical male heroes, Amal's growth is shaped not by abstract philosophical inquiry but by concrete experiences of injustice, servitude, and gender-based discrimination. Saeed's depiction of Amal's development draws heavily on themes of education, moral courage, and collective empowerment, aligning with Roberta Trites' (2000) analysis of adolescent literature as a negotiation between power and identity. Trites emphasizes that contemporary youth protagonists often confront institutional forces that challenge their agency, a theme central to Amal's transformation.

Saeed's novel also intersects with feminist critiques of development narratives by foregrounding the importance of mentorship and female solidarity. The dynamics between Amal, Nasreen Baji, and Nabila highlight not only intergenerational differences in negotiating oppression but also the role of education and literacy as tools of resistance. These elements mirror Fraiman's (1993) call for "unbecoming" narratives—stories that reject the seamless integration of the protagonist into society and instead champion resistance, critique, and reformation.

Moreover, the novel exemplifies what scholars have termed the *postcolonial Bildungsroman*, in which the individual's journey is inextricably linked to the social and political environment. The genre, in this formulation, becomes a space to interrogate national, cultural, and gender identities that are in flux or under threat. Amal's resistance to Jawad Sahib's tyranny and her commitment to education signify not just personal growth but a reimagining of communal structures and values. This aligns with the works of postcolonial theorists who argue that identity formation in colonized or neo-feudal societies is inevitably political (Hirsch, 1989; Moretti, 1987).

By situating *Amal Unbound* within these theoretical and literary contexts, it becomes evident that Saeed's work represents a meaningful contribution to the evolving form of the *Bildungsroman*. Her portrayal of a young Muslim girl's formation in rural Pakistan not only challenges canonical definitions of the genre but also asserts the need for intersectional narratives that capture the complexities of growing up amid systemic inequality.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does *Amal Unbound* reflect the core characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* genre?
2. How do Amal's experiences in a patriarchal and class-based society shape her psychological and moral growth?

3. What elements of feminist and postcolonial theory are reflected in Amal's journey from innocence to activism?
4. How does Amal's story challenge traditional, Eurocentric constructions of identity formation and maturity?

Objectives

1. To analyze *Amal Unbound* as a modern *Bildungsroman* featuring a female Muslim protagonist.
2. To examine how Amal's development both aligns with and challenges traditional *Bildungsroman* structures.
3. To explore the influence of gender, class, and rural Pakistani society on Amal's formative experiences.
4. To contribute to the discourse on feminist and postcolonial adaptations of the *Bildungsroman*, particularly in South Asian literature.

The Bildungsroman: Historical and Theoretical Context

The Bildungsroman, as first theorized in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, focuses on the self-realization of the protagonist through a series of life experiences that shape their inner world and social function. M. H. Abrams (1999) describes the genre as emphasizing "the growth and education of a young man through successive stages of conflict and reflection."

The typical structure includes:

- **Initial idealism or innocence**
- **Disruption or exile**
- **Internal conflict and self-discovery**
- **Integration or reconciliation with society**

However, the traditional Bildungsroman has been critiqued for its gender and cultural exclusivity (Fraiman, 1993; Hirsch, 1989). Modern reimaginations—particularly in feminist and postcolonial literature—seek to include the voices of those historically excluded from narratives of growth. These versions often focus on protagonists whose development occurs in hostile or unjust societies, emphasizing not just internal transformation but the socio-political obstacles that shape identity.

In *Amal Unbound*, Saeed blends the internal development of the protagonist with external resistance, thus shifting the genre's traditional focus from individual to collective transformation. Amal's trajectory is both a personal story and a cultural critique, which places the novel within the expanded bounds of the contemporary Bildungsroman.

Amal's Aspirational Beginnings: Seeds of Formation

At the beginning of the novel, Amal is portrayed as an intelligent, curious, and optimistic young girl. Her love for literature—especially the poetry of Hafiz—demonstrates a desire for beauty, meaning, and intellectual freedom. Raised in a rural village with limited resources, Amal dreams of becoming a teacher, despite the cultural expectations that prioritize marriage and domesticity for girls.

This phase aligns with the Bildungsroman's archetypal depiction of

youthful idealism. Amal's identity is marked by a strong sense of self and a desire to grow intellectually, even though societal norms discourage such ambitions for girls. Her father's modest encouragement and her mother's overburdened pragmatism form a subtle domestic conflict that foreshadows larger societal tensions.

Amal's early dreams are not merely personal—they symbolize resistance to the status quo. Her desire to be educated represents a challenge to the patriarchal norms of her village. Her act of rebellion—refusing to run errands so she can read—marks the first of many moments where Amal asserts agency, laying the groundwork for her developmental journey.

Exile and Coercion: The Loss of Innocence

The pivotal moment in Amal's narrative—and in her identity development—occurs when she speaks out against Jawad Sahib, the son of the village's powerful feudal lord. For this perceived insolence, Amal is taken from her family and forced to work at the Khan estate to "repay" a fictional debt. This coercive servitude is the novel's equivalent of the Bildungsroman motif of exile or disruption.

Here, Amal's transformation deepens. Her personal struggle becomes entangled with systemic injustice. She experiences not just individual loss but becomes a symbolic victim of a larger feudal, patriarchal structure. While early Bildungsroman protagonists often face existential or moral dilemmas, Amal's struggle is viscerally real—rooted in class exploitation and gender-based power dynamics.

This loss of innocence is a turning point. Amal begins to understand the mechanics of power, oppression, and silence. Yet, her character refuses to be subdued. Even in captivity, Amal finds ways to learn, read, and question. This phase of forced servitude tests Amal's moral resilience and strengthens her resolve.

The Power of Learning: Growth through Mentorship and Experience

In classic Bildungsroman literature, mentors and companions play a crucial role in shaping the protagonist's development (Moretti, 1987). Amal finds both guidance and tension through figures such as Nasreen Baji and Nabila.

Nasreen Baji, the lady of the house, is complicit in the feudal system yet occasionally kind to Amal. This duality introduces Amal to the complexities of human morality and shows her that resistance is not always direct. Nabila, a fellow servant, initially hostile, becomes a confidante. Their evolving friendship highlights the internalized class hierarchies among the oppressed and the potential for solidarity.

These relationships expose Amal to different worldviews and ethical dilemmas, deepening her cognitive development. She learns to navigate power not only through confrontation but through subtle defiance and strategic intelligence. Her continued education—even in secrecy—underscores a recurring motif: the

pursuit of knowledge as resistance.

Awakening and Moral Agency

The climax of Amal's moral development occurs when she discovers Jawad Sahib's criminal activities, including the murder of a local man who sought justice. At this juncture, Amal must choose between self-preservation and truth. Her decision to report Jawad Sahib, despite the danger, marks the full emergence of her moral agency.

This act signifies Amal's transition from internal to external action. In Bildungsroman terms, this is the moment when the protagonist steps into adult responsibilities—not simply by age, but through ethical decision-making. Amal chooses justice over fear, a community over isolation, and action over silence.

Her bravery disrupts not only her own servitude but also inspires broader resistance in the village. This transformation echoes Trites' (2000) understanding of adolescent literature as a negotiation between power and identity. Amal's empowerment is inseparable from her moral growth.

Return and Integration: A New Social Role

The final stage of Amal's journey involves a return—not to innocence, but to purpose. With Jawad Sahib's arrest and her release, Amal reenters her community not as a victim, but as a leader. Her voice has become a catalyst for change. Her growth is now tied to the collective well-being of her village.

This return is central to the Bildungsroman tradition, where the protagonist's integration into society is redefined. For Amal, integration does not mean submission to norms but the transformation of those norms through activism. She aspires to build a future where education is accessible to all, especially girls.

Amal's character thus closes the narrative arc: from ignorance to awareness, from powerlessness to action, from self-interest to collective justice.

Intersectionality and Identity Formation: Gender, Class, and Religion

Amal's development cannot be fully understood without examining the intersecting forces of gender, class, and religion. As a working-class Muslim girl in rural Pakistan, Amal's subjectivity is formed within multiple systems of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) framework of *intersectionality* helps reveal how these overlapping identities compound Amal's vulnerabilities while also shaping her resistance.

Her experiences are not just shaped by her status as a girl, but by her family's economic precarity and the religious expectations placed upon her. The feudal lords use religion and tradition to justify control, while Amal reclaims these same cultural tools—particularly poetry and moral integrity—to assert her agency. Thus, her Bildungsroman narrative becomes an act of reclaiming identity in a space where identities are imposed and constrained. This layered identity formation foregrounds the unique challenges

faced by girls in the Global South and highlights how Amal's personal growth is inextricable from her social positioning. It also reflects the postcolonial rewriting of the Bildungsroman genre—no longer focused on a singular, universal protagonist but open to the complexity of subaltern voices.

Resistance as Education: The School as a Site of Liberation

A recurring motif in *Amal Unbound* is the transformative power of education. The novel places significant symbolic and literal value on learning—not merely as academic pursuit, but as a revolutionary act. Amal's development hinges on her access to knowledge and her evolving belief that education is the key to systemic change.

When Amal teaches herself and others in secret, the act becomes a form of defiance against the structures that aim to silence her. This aligns with Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *critical pedagogy*, where education is a means to awaken consciousness and enable action. For Amal, the act of learning is never passive—it is inherently political.

The school thus becomes more than a physical space; it represents a future rooted in justice. Amal's desire to teach others upon returning to her village signifies her commitment to using education not for personal advancement alone, but for collective empowerment. This reframes the Bildungsroman's traditional theme of self-cultivation to one of social responsibility.

Amal among Other Female Bildungsroman Protagonists

Amal's development resonates with characters like Lenny in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and Raheen in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*. All these protagonists undergo transformation amidst social upheaval. However, Amal's youth, rural background, and Muslim identity render her development uniquely intersectional.

Unlike Western Bildungsromans, which often emphasize personal freedom or romantic autonomy, *Amal Unbound* centers on socio-political liberation. Amal's journey critiques not just family dynamics but entire social structures—feudalism, patriarchy, and illiteracy. She becomes a symbol of the changing possibilities for young girls in the Global South.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be said that Aisha Saeed's *Amal Unbound* reinvents the Bildungsroman by centering a rural Muslim girl in a narrative of transformation, resistance, and social awakening. While Amal's journey adheres to the structural elements of the classic Bildungsroman—idealism, crisis, moral awakening, and social reintegration—it diverges in significant ways that reflect the evolving dynamics of the genre in a postcolonial and feminist literary context. Amal's story resists the traditional notion of development as assimilation into the dominant social order. Instead, her growth is marked by a deepening awareness of systemic oppression and a conscious decision to challenge it.

Through her transformation from a curious village girl to an empowered agent of justice, Amal embodies a reimagined model of

coming-of-age—one in which resistance, solidarity, and education serve as the true markers of maturity. Her development is forged not in isolation but within a community that reflects the complexities of gender, class, and cultural hierarchies in South Asia. In this sense, *Amal Unbound* critiques not only the injustices within the fictional village setting but also the limitations of traditional literary frameworks that have historically excluded such narratives. Moreover, Amal's resilience offers a counternarrative to the passive, victimized portrayals of girls in rural and patriarchal societies. Her moral courage, thirst for knowledge, and ethical choices position her as a transformative figure—not only within her fictional world but within the broader scope of contemporary young adult literature. Her voice represents the potential for literature to amplify marginalized perspectives and to redefine what it means to come of age in contexts marked by resistance, inequality, and hope. In conclusion, *Amal Unbound* expands the boundaries of the Bildungsroman by embedding personal growth within socio-political struggle. Amal's story reminds readers that identity is not merely discovered—it is forged in confrontation with the world's injustices, and maturity is not conformity but courageous dissent. Through this lens, the novel contributes powerfully to feminist and postcolonial literary discourses, offering a vision of development that is inclusive, intersectional, and deeply human.

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