



**Some Aspects of the Arabic Female Bildungsroman in Iman
Humaydan's novel "Wild Mulberries"¹¹⁹**

Irine Shotashvili

PhD student of Arabic Philology

Faculty of Humanities

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

1, Ilia Tchavtchavadze ave, Tbilisi, Georgia

+995 592 30 20 10. irine.shotashvili@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0003-4543-0354

Abstract

The article examines the novel "Wild Mulberries" (2001) by the contemporary Lebanese writer Iman Humaydan. The aim of our research is to discuss this novel in the context of the Arabic female novel of development (Bildungsroman). In order to achieve this, we compare it with the plot and the themes presented in two Arabic novels. The following novels are: "The Birds of September" (1962) by Emily Nasrallah and "The Leaves of Narcissus" (2001) by Sumayya Ramadan. Acc-

¹¹⁹ The scientific article was prepared within the framework of the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation Doctoral Educational Programs Grant "Contemporary Lebanese Women's Writing (Based on the Work of Iman Humaydan Younes)" (PHDF-23-6382).

ordingly, we conducted the research using comparative and contrastive methods.

Only a small part of Arabic female Bildungsromans has been studied so far. The relevance of our research lies in showing, on the basis of research, by what parameters "Wild Mulberries" corresponds to the criteria of an Arabic novel of female development.

Keywords: Arabic novel of development; Bildungsroman; Arabic Female Bildungsroman.

Introduction

The development novel, also known as the "Bildungsroman", originated in 19th century Germany, has come a long way and has reached us today with enriched topics. It is known by various names, for example, as the "formation", "education" or "coming of age" novel. We find works of this type in American, European and Eastern literature.

The first examples of the Bildungsroman feature male protagonists, but over time, works have emerged that feature women as their main characters. A very notable example is Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. There has also been a growing interest in female Bildungsromans, with Western writing receiving particular attention lately followed by Eastern literature as well.

It can be said that the study of Arabic female Bildungsroman, is still incompletely reflected in scientific studies of new and recent Arabic literature, and only a small part of this type of literature has been studied.

The aim of the article is to discuss the novel "Wild Mulberries" by the contemporary Lebanese writer Iman Humaydan in the context of the genre of the Arabic female Bildungsroman. To achieve this, we will compare the novel with the plots and themes of traditional Arabic and Arabic female Bildungsromans, identifying common and distinctive features. We chose Emily Nasrallah's "The Birds of September" and

Sumayya Ramadan's "The Leaves of Narcissus" as examples of Arabic female Bildungsroman.

Methods

Our research method, based on the specifics of the research object, is a comparative and contrastive analysis. We tried to form a unified picture of the problem and present the relevant conclusions based on the study and analysis of parts of a specific text.

Conclusions

The study showed that, while the novel "Wild Mulberries" by contemporary Lebanese writer Iman Humaydan follows the standard plot of a traditional Bildungsroman, it also repeats the themes of a female Bildungsroman. Ultimately, it can be said that "Wild Mulberries" meets the criteria of the Arabic female Bildungsroman genre.

Discussion

The novel of development (Bildungsroman) was emerged in Germany in 1809 by Karl Morgenstern's lecture entitled "On the Nature of the Bildungsroman" at the present-day University of Tartu. The lecture was later published, but it did not find much popularity and did not establish itself in the literary field. The term is attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey, in his work "Poetry and Experience" (1906), in which the author argues that the Bildungsroman is a uniquely German achievement.

Dilthey considers the Bildungsroman to be historically and nationally distinctive, while Morgenstern recognizes it as a universal subcategory of the modern novel. Dilthey's approach emphasizes the "interiority" and "personality" of the genre, while Morgenstern, on the contrary, emphasizes the development not of the character, but of the reader and the real world (Boes, 2009:647).

Dilthey's working text is Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship" (1795-96), on the basis of which he argues that the hero of a Bildungsroman should go through stages of life, during which he will acquire the experience and life values that will prepare him for the next stages (Boes, 2006:231).

Thus, according to the works of Dilthey and Morgenstern, it can be stated that European traditional development novels include the following themes: childhood, the conflict of generations provincialism, travel, self-education, alienation, trials caused by love, and the search for a calling.

The Arabic Bildungsroman, as a subgenre of the novel, was first introduced into the literary field by Nedal al-Musa (al-Musa 1993). His theory is based on the German school, he analyzes the themes presented in European Bildungsromans and compares them with the themes and structure of Arabic novels.

Al-Musa presents the following novels for analysis: Tawfiq al-Hakim's "Bird of the East" (1938), Dhu al-Nun Ayyub's "Doctor Ibrahim" (1939), Yahya Haqqi's "Umm Hashim's Lamp" (1945), Suhail Idris's "The Latin Quarter" (1953), al-Tayib Salih's "Season of Migration to the North" (1966), and Ghalib Hamza Abu al-Faraj's "The Lost Years" (1980). It is noteworthy that in the above-mentioned novels, only men appear as protagonists.

According to Nedal Al-Musa, the plot of the novel of Arabic Bildungsroman develops as follows: the protagonist grows up in a provincial family, but in search of adventure he leaves home and sets off in search of his destiny, in the meantime he falls in love with a foreign woman, whose inaccessibility or in some cases the romance with her causes his inner change. During the journey, the character's path intersects with various teachers and tutors, who play a certain role in his education, inner growth. Romantic adventures and the acquisition of new knowledge ultimately bring him closer to reality, thus completing the educational process of his life.

In Arabic Bildungsroman, the protagonist's journey is usually from the East to the West. The topic of the encounter and confrontation of the Eastern and the Western world has been the focus of many writers since the 19th and 20th centuries. On the one hand, this was due to the existence of a colonial history between the Arab world and Europe, and, on the other hand, to the large number of young people

sent to Europe for education, including the future generation of Arab intellectuals, whose works reflect the interaction of these two different cultures. (Surmava, 2018:58).

As we have seen, Arabic Bildungsromans in most cases repeat the same themes as European Bildungsromans, although we also see a new theme: the contrast between the spiritual East and the materialistic West. The journey of an Eastern protagonist to the West, the experience of culture shock, the analysis of Western culture, and the reevaluation of Eastern values.

Before discussing the female Bildungsroman, it would be appropriate to first mention the issue of feminist criticism of literature, which was first raised by Virginia Woolf in her essay "A Room of One's Own", published in 1929. In a short but noteworthy essay, Woolf attempts to answer the important question of that time: why there are so few female writers in history. She also discusses the issues of the limited role of women in the society and the difficulties of their financial well-being. Virginia Woolf argues that since the novel has a connection with a real life, its values are to some extent deriving from real life. However, it is obvious that women's values are very often different from the values of the other sex. Woolf distinguishes between female and male writing, and also emphasizes the influence of gender on the plot of a work. The experience that creates a female narrative, changes the female writer's attitude towards the tradition of narration, which can further shape the text written by a woman. (Abel and Hirsh, 1983:162).

Woolf was followed by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, discussing this issue in her essay - "The Second Sex." Interest increased during the strengthening of the second wave of feminism, and the reanalysis of literary texts began.

In the 1970s, Elaine Showalter introduced the term "gynocriticism," which was a progression of Woolf's ideas and meant not the study of representations of women in literary works, but the study of

the social and economic conditions of women writers, their written language. (Showalter, 1986:12).

As for the female Bildungsroman, active study of this type of work began in the 1970s. Feminist critics analyze novels written by female writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where the main characters are also women. Feminist novels of this period reflect "the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by patriarchal gender norms." (Lazzaro-Weis, 1990:17). According to Annis Pratt, the purpose of female Bildungsromans is to show readers how society pushes women's stagnation rather than development (Pratt, 1981:14).

At first glance, it may seem that the only difference between the female and traditional Bildungsromans is the opposite gender of the protagonist, but research by Elizabeth Abel and Marianne Hirsch shows that the female Bildungsroman has undergone some changes as a genre. The authors suggest that while the male protagonist's struggle is to reconcile individual desire to social convention, the female protagonist's struggle is to "give voice to any aspiration." Whereas the male protagonist has a voice and is free to participate in the rational critical discourse of the public sphere, the female protagonist, by contrast, struggles to be heard. (Abel and Hirsh, 1983:7).

Abel and Hirsch distinguish two narrative patterns in the female Bildungsroman: the first is a continuous development from childhood to adulthood, and the second is an "awakening" later in life, usually after marriage, although both share a common characteristic: an inward focus to assert oneself, rebel, or retreat. (Abel and Hirsh, 1983:8)

Aspects of the Arabic female Bildungsroman were first analyzed by Nedal Al-Musa in his article "The Changing Image of the Heroine in the Arab Female Bildungsromane" (2006), where he compares two Arab novels with American and Turkish female Bildungsromans. Emily Nasrallah's "The Birds of September" (1962) and Sumayya Ramadan's "The Leaves of Narcissus" (2001) are works of Arab women writers. "The Birds of September" describes a society that does not create

conditions for the development of the younger generation, but rather sets limits for them. Social norms established in a Lebanese village push boys towards migration, while women are bound by the rules of a patriarchal society. The protagonist, Muna, unlike the other silent women of the village, is well aware of the cruel customs of the village and even makes a list of the "hostile forces" that prevent her from being who she is. These forces include the power of the village priest, obsolete traditions, school teachers, and a male-dominated value system.

One of the main topics of the Bildungsroman, love, is also relevant in Emily Nasrallah's novel. Muna grows up in a conservative Arab society and cannot completely reject the idea of marriage, but she also does not have the opportunity to openly oppose the arranged marriage that the other girls in the village obediently accept.

At the end of the novel, we see that despite many struggles, Muna is unable to fully realize herself and live the life she wants. Based on Roger Allen's article, Nedal Al-Musa expresses the opinion that the heroes of Arabic novels containing the topic of love cannot fulfil themselves through marriage. (al-Mousa, 1993:262).

Kim, the main character of "The Leaves of Narcissus", grows up in a patriarchal society like Muna, but unlike Muna, Kim is able to delve into herself while traveling abroad, to the West. Having gone to Ireland to receive an education, the young girl distances herself from the influences of her native culture and begins to understand herself, her strong spirit allowing her to raise her voice and even challenge patriarchal rules.

The meeting of the West and the East is just as relevant here as in the aforementioned Arabic traditional Bildungsromans, although Sumayya Ramadan tries to show us a free person formed as a result of the confrontation of two cultures - a person without a homeland and a possessor of all homelands, a possessor of all and at the same time, a possessor of none of the languages." (al-Mousa, 2006:267).

Kim's love experience is richer and bolder, attempting to express her independence and challenge her native culture, what is completely different from Muna's experience.

These two Arabic female Bildungsromans feature the same plot and themes that can be found in both Western and traditional Arabic Bildungsromans. The main difference between female and traditional Bildungsromans is the factors that influence the development of the protagonists. If in the case of men, this factor is the relationship with people they meet on their way of life and their influence, in the case of women, the main cause and means of their change is self-introspection and self-study.

As for Iman Humaydan's novel "Wild Mulberries", it can be safely said that it is one of the most striking examples of a Bildungsroman. The events in the novel take place in the 1930s in Ain Tahun, a small village in mountainous Lebanon, which is characterized by religious and ethnic diversity. The protagonist, Sarah, grows up in a strict patriarchal society, where the rules are scrupulously followed by both men and women. Only Sarah's mother was able to escape this system by running away from the village. Sarah's brother has been thinking and planning to leave the place his whole life, but he cannot escape the family troubles and remains in the village. Sarah's aunt, Shams, is also unable to fulfill her heart's desire. Sara's brother's long-standing promise to marry her to Ibrahim, the man of her choice, is empty.

At Sara's home nobody talks about her mother, the topic is a taboo. Sara has nothing tangible of her mother except for one photo. She tries to create an idea about her by connecting stories she has heard from acquaintances: „I try to collect small shards of news about he just as a mason binds together bricks and mud to rebuild a house struck by an earthquake. In the end, however, I have nothing concrete, only fragments of memory that I try to construct without success“(Humaydan, 2008:11).¹²⁰

¹²⁰ All quotes used in the article are taken from Michelle Hartmann's translation (Humaydan 2008)

The mysterious figure of her mother looms over every aspect of Sarah's life, determining her conscious and unconscious actions, including her romantic relationship with Karim, her brother's friend.

Sara has known Karim since childhood, and their feelings develop over time, but the idea of marriage matures in Sara when she learns that Karim has to go to England for work and she has a chance to visit the Porter family and investigate her mother's story: „I believed that Karim might help me forget the woman whose soul I have been searching for since she left fifteen years ago” (Humaydan, 2008:86).

After several years of living together, Sara feels alienated from Karim. Her husband cannot fill the void left by the trauma of her mother's abandonment.

Sarah's quest to find her mother continues with a trip to the West, which leads to more spiritual anxiety: „I thought that I would start a new life abroad, a different life unlike this lonely one. But I feel that moving has only increased my burdens anew. I have started to feel that my life now is no different than it was, except that it has left behind me a longer trail of loneliness and an unreachable accumulation of time” (Humaydan, 2008:100).

Sarah cannot adapt to living in England, the environment is foreign to her, she has no relationship with anyone except her husband, she withdraws into herself and thinks about returning to Ain Tahun again. Meeting the Porter family, instead of giving her answers, on the contrary, raised more questions. Arriving in the village, she realizes that she has returned to where her life began. „I had to make a complete circle in order to arrive at this place, the very same place where I began” (Humaydan, 2008:117).

Conclusion

The study of the novel has shown us that "Wild Mulberries" follows the standard plot of a traditional Bildungsroman and meets the criteria of the genre. It begins with a description of the protagonist's childhood years, continues with her love story, travels, and ends with her return home in a changed and transformed form.

It is noteworthy that, like the traditional Arabic Bildungsroman, it contains the theme of contact with Western culture, which causes alienation and crisis in the protagonist.

As for the characteristics of the Arabic female Bildungsroman, first of all, self-reflection and introspection should be emphasized, which is clearly expressed in the case of Sarah.

The novel also vividly depicts the patriarchal system established in the Lebanese highland village, which governs the lives of not only the protagonist, but also the rest of the characters.

Although Sarah's love story develops according to her own wishes, it is clear that for her the marriage is a step towards self-realization, which ends in failure, and at the end of the novel we see a character who has gone through a difficult path, who returns to the starting point and realizes that she had to go through all of these in order to return to herself.

References:

- Surmava, N. (2018). West and East in 20th Century Arabic Literature (10s-60s), Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philology (Ph.D.) at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi.
- Humaydan, I. (2021). "Wild Mulberries", "Intelekti publishing", Tbilisi
- Humaydan, I. (2008). "Wild Mulberries", "Interlink Books".
- Al-Mousa, N. M. (1993). The Arabic Bildungsroman: A generic appraisal. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25(2), 223-240.
- Al-Mousa, N. M. (2006). The Changing Image of the Heroine in the Arabic Female Bildungsromane. *Middle Eastern Literatures*, Vol. 9, No. 3, December.
- Abel, E. Hirsch, M. Langland, E. (1983) Eds. *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. Hanover: UP of New England.
- Boes T. (2006). Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends. *Literature Compass* 3/2, 230-243

- Lazzaro-Weis C. (1990). The Female "Bildungsroman": Calling It into Question. NWSA Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1. 16-34.
- Pratt, A. (1981). Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.