

## Bildungsroman in Avni Doshi's '*Girl in White Cotton*'

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### Abstract

The term "Bildungsroman" is a literary genre. The German word Bildungsroman means "novel of education" or "novel of formation". It deals with the particular person's intellectual and ethical growth from the childhood to adulthood. Avni Doshi's '*Girl in White Cotton*' relates the growing up or "coming of age" of a protagonist. Bildungsroman also deals with the conflict between the main character and society, where the protagonist tend to accept the social value. This paper brings out the Bildungsroman based novel.

**Keywords** - *Bildungsroman, Protagonist, Entwicklungroman*

### Introduction

Each individual makes various choices throughout their life but the decisions taken during the critical time, especially during adolescence, play a major role in the development of one's character and individuality. The conflict between an individual and society has remained a fundamental concept in literature for centuries.

In the 1820s, German philologist Johann Karl Simon Morgenstern coined the term Bildungsroman in this concept Morgenstern specified that any work within the genre could be identified as a Bildungsroman because it depicts the hero's Bildung means development as it begins and proceeds to a certain level of perfection. Novels within the genre focus on the development of the individual and his or her moral growth from youth to adulthood. Bildungsroman novels are often written by authors who refuse to go by society norms, both in their professional and personal lives. Bildungsroman novels are very often autobiographical and contain elements lifted from the author's own personal experiences.

Another name for Bildungsroman is the general term Entwicklungroman, or 'novel of development'. This name applies to novels constructed to follow the personality development of the protagonist. However, it is sometimes reserved for only those works that describe the hero's physical passage from youth to maturity without delving into his psychological progress. In other

words, the novels that pay less attention to the hero's intellect and emotions than more fully developed works fit into this category.

The term *Erziehungsroman* means, novel of education. This variation is a more pedagogic form of the *Bildungsroman*. It is not only concerned with the formal education and training of the protagonist, but the novel also intends to teach certain lessons about values to the reader as well.

The female protagonist of a *Bildungsroman* encounters problems specific to growing up female in a male-dominated world. Early female *Bildungsroman* with female protagonists mostly follows the traditional pattern that the mature female sees marriage as her fulfilment. Intellectual and social development is often achieved through the mentorship of a knowledgeable and sophisticated man. In some early nineteenth-century female *Bildungsroman*, the female's education occurs through an older and wiser husband. Later novels portray women entering marriage as the culmination of the mutual growth that occurs in a loving relationship. While a male protagonist in a *Bildungsroman* may meet his pivotal crisis in the course of his professional career, the female protagonist's turning point may result from a romantic entanglement.

Indian English novelists have persistently dealt with the very important aspect of human circumstances. The search for one's identity is a common and recurrent theme in Indian English fiction. There have been novels of introspection, personal and confessional in nature, there have been rewritings of history and restatements of the past. There has also been the *Bildungsroman* where the individual has worked towards his selfhood. However, the *Bildungsroman* in Indian writing in English has worked differently. Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* where Smriti's selfhood begins to emerge only after an unhappy marriage and motherhood, as in Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Where Sita finds herself through the rejection by her daughter, *Bildungsroman* is contrary to the Indian concept of character which projects consistency and vernacular.

Thus, the term *Bildungsroman* is applied to many novels of all times. Though it is not a dominant genre, it has a universal appeal because it deals with the universal experience of growing up or coming of the age. The readers observe the protagonist's journey towards maturity and learn from his or her experiences. A literary piece of work contains certain basic elements such as plot, character, point of view, setting, tone, and style. In particular kind of literary work, any one of these elements can be emphasized over the others. In the case of the *Bildungsroman*, character is primarily emphasised more than anything and the structure of the story tends to follow the standard pattern like introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement.

The novel *Girl in White Cotton*, focuses on the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a main character (Antara) and finally, how she gains a better understanding of the world. An *Entwicklungroman* or 'novel of development' consists of protagonists' physical passage from youth to maturity.

The protagonist experiences an event that sets her on a journey. This experience is usually a tragic loss or sense of unhappiness causes the character to leave her family. The novel begins with a statement that "I would be lying if I say my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (1). It explains how the novel is set out by describing the fraught relationship between a mother and daughter. The novel alternates between scenes of the past in which the young Antara suffers distress and neglect, and the present day in which the adult Antara is prosperous, middle-class and recently married to Dilip. They live in a modern apartment, do lines of coke at parties and lunch at a private members' club. As Tara's health declines, Antara has to deal with her feelings for her mother and whether she can really care for someone who doesn't seem to have cared much for her.

The narrator, Antara, has a difficult relationship with her mother. Tara was something of a free spirit in her youth. She has nothing to do with the restrictive marriage expected by her family to go and live at an Ashram, and later ended up on the street. Her family refused to help unless Tara fell into line and returned to a loveless marriage. Her refusal to do so is an act of rebellion, but it also means that little Antara is dragged around from place to place, often in danger, often forgotten by her.

The term white occurs frequently in the novel as an image operates in the novel through its various registers of meaning. It is resonant for all of its connotations with renunciation, purity, motherhood, memory and grief. The narrator does not set out with any expectation to unpack this image, but it appears again and again, and then white excavates its possibilities in the narrative.

Antara was interested to look after her Alzheimer's patient (Tara). She took the initiative to bring the memories of her dying mother and can do nothing about it. There is no way to make her remember the things that's she has done in the past. Tara tried her best to recall her mother's past memories.

"The character is almost always stuck in an unbending social order where society has strict rules that one is supposed to follow." "It was a golden age, a time when all the wrongs of the past were righted and the future was full of promise"(38). This line states the marriage life of Tara, a woman with hope holding desires predicting the happiest future behind her gamine features. For a while it seemed that Tara had shifted in what she desired, that her teenage rebellion had quelled and she would fall in line with what her parents called a good fortune. She

trims her hair, bought colorful clothes, and started spending time at club. She professed a desire to study further, and even she announced that she would like to take hotel management or catering while her husband have done with engineering degree.

In their wedding pictures, Antara's father is a young groom mounted on a bedecked horse. Tracing the culture of Indian wedding, men take a circle around the musicians, cheering and whistling with the beat of dholak. Women dance a little behind, managing their saris and waving one arm in the air, watching the young men but not joining in their play. There is a picture of the party halting outside a gate, presumably, wedding guests. Others from the street in regular clothes appear now and again. Gossips of wedding guest flooded in the air. By morning, the girl will be transformed. A new husband, new life and when she finds herself alone, perhaps she will still cry, thinking of the past, mourning an end that did not culminate in death.

On the first day in Tara's new home, her mother –in-law gives her a coarse bar of white soap and hand towel to use for her baths. She also passes on a stack of old saris that had belonged to her mother – in-law. Tara was asked to wear from then on. Tara was forced to listen to barring sounds as music in radio and bored of classical voices she personally preferred The Doors, or Freddie Mercury. "You know what would be nice? the older lady said, If you wait by the door when it's time for my son to come home. I used to do it for my husband when we were newly-weds" (44)

Antara was in the state, she could neither oppose nor accept but she was doll in the hands of her mother-in-law. Her inner turbulence speaks though, "Like what, exactly? What was there to like about standing by the door like a dog?" (44)

India has predominantly been a patriarchal society. Man occupied a prominent place in every sphere of life leaving woman as a fragile creature to depend upon him for everything beginning from her existence to her sustenance. In such a circumstance, a woman's struggle in a male dominated society can be but easily fathomed. She was considered good for nothing when it came to do something intellectual or artistic. It was inconceivable that women were able to think, study or able to make decisions, could express themselves in the form of speech, poetry, story - telling, art.

The room was a cage with privileged class. The bedcover was made of grey synthetic cloth, and she wondered how the servants managed to wash it. The floor was a burning red marble that in some light looked like an endless abyss to fall into. Tara knew marriages were generally unhappy, but she was young and had not fully metabolized the idea that this would be her reality. When Tara's husband returned from his studies, he was greeted by his mother before

going to read his books. After dinner, he often joined his mother in living room and put his head in her lap.

As days pass, Tara thinks her husband would be strange, moody and distant. Her mother-in-law would be determined that her son would excel in his studies and was keen that he should make her happy. The prize for his efforts would be America, where he could earn a master degree in the snow, eat burgers every day, and buy acid- washed jeans. Tara learned to long for that dream too, for a while she wanted her husband to be proud of her so she chopped her long hair off and dressed in floral silks when they went to lunch for Sundays.

A year after their wedding, Antara was born. Her mother-in-law planned to join them when they went abroad. “you will never be able to look after the house alone” The depth of Tara’s gloom and her alienation from her new family, where Tara’s mother Nani refused to hear any complaints from Tara and that made Tara to feel lonely and desperate. The surge of prenatal hormone, and the fear of new life that awaited her, but she began to turn to turn back her former self. She let her hair grow and stopped wearing make-up and shoulder- pads. She disposed her mother-in- law’s saris, and blamed an aged servant for stealing them. She smoked in secret though she knew it could be dangerous for her foetus.

Tara wanted back her old cotton comforts and announced that she wanted to start going for guru’s sastang, to hear him speak. It was an odd request from a married woman who had never shown any interest in religion and her mother-in-law tried to stop her. But, she was determined. Tara was on her way uncared what others said on her. Even after Antara was born, Tara would disappear every day. Dripping with milk, leaving her daughter Antara unfed. When Tara’s mother-in-law states Tara to take her child along with her when Antara was old enough, reflecting that there was not love for both mother and daughter as Antara was another girl, considered as another nuisance’

The conflict between mother and daughter-in- law is that mother-in-law failed to recognize the real attributes of her daughter in law as she considers herself to be the best. Tara’s mother-in-law always considers the preference of her own son career while she does not care about the career of Tara. The novel suggests that the mother in law should incorporate the preference of daughter in law as she becomes the part of their house. By providing equal preferences to their daughter- in- law, it helps to realign the understanding and feeling for each other which possibly mitigates the conflict to a certain extent.

There is parallelism of mother-in-law of Tara and Antara in aspects of abroad life as well as superstitious norms. Both showered their royalties bragging about their accomplishments as upper class culture and myths. “The British built some lovely buildings in India” (23). Mother-in-

laws of Tara and Antara knots petted and pampering sons like when Antara was asked to perform a ritual because she was manglik the red planet, was found to be in a dangerous aspect, placed squarely in the house of marriage. She also explained that if Antara married Dilip, her fiery energies would kill him. The rituals arranged to be Antara as a married women by a bamboo stick initially, as the rituals pass on by the pandit by pacifying her “He will absorb your bad energies by marrying you first, so your next husband doesn’t suffer” (14)

A simple mangal sutra was placed around her neck and a crimson line of sindoor in her brows to symbolize that she is a married woman now. After the ceremony the necklace is ripped off and the red paste is smeared across her forehead. The pandit said “Married and divorced” (16)

Superstition has been analysed in prevalence and in performance in the worlds of athletics, academics, and economics. When analysing superstition and performance, there is an important distinction between wishing away bad luck and the belief that a particular behaviour, or lucky phrase or charm, will have a positive outcome on performance that too mother in laws and mothers have upper hand in Indian society. Initially, mothers-in-law are happy to see their sons married. But after a while, insecurity creeps in. The mothers-in-law who are used to running the house in a certain way feel threatened when the daughter-in-law wants to make changes.

In the case of Tara, birth of a baby girl is considered as bad omen reflecting Indian society that prefers a boy baby over a girl. Sweets are not distributed amongst friends and family members. The number of children to be borne by the couple is decided by the members of the family. They still pamper boys compared to girls. The expenses are borne by the girl’s parents because they are held responsible for the girl’s expenditure. Times have changed but the mentality of Indians still needs a major boost. There’s a lot to be rectified regarding comments on how women are treated in society, and the questions about how women are entitled to put their own needs above those of others.

A majority of the character’s conflicts result from this social order, where the character struggles between her personal needs and “the judgments enforced by this unbending social order.” (23)

Antara and her mother enter an ashram. It’s not particularly peaceful. Through the child’s eyes, it’s more like a place of terror. The young Antara, by contrast, is powerless when Tara leaves the family home to take up permanent residence at the ashram. She takes Antara with her and narrator painfully details the child’s unattended thirst and hunger, the damp mattress in the courtyard on which she sleeps and the nightly shrieking of the guru’s frenzied followers.

Tara met Kali Meta in ashram where Antara was completely pampered by her. Kali Meta thought of herself as the mother of Antara, as nurturer of many followers of baba. Kali Meta

invited the new devotee to sit down, but Tara was not very sure of staying there completely. But when giant (baba) entered Tara used rushed to the front and found a spot at his feet. She meditated there for more than four hours, when she opened the eyes she looked up her guru and said she would devote her life to him. She placed her head in his lap and wept. He would be considered as humble servant, a leader, a god because he was believed that he had taken human form once more to relieve us of our ignorance. His lineage of teachers and masters include famous maharishis and acharyas, and even certain sages who appeared in ancient texts. These are outlined in his autobiography. The children address him as oontbai and the guru in ashram is called baba throughout the novel.

As a teenager, Tara admires the ashram from outside, the freedom that festooned its devotees, but she only entered herself years later, when she found her husband's house was full of loneliness and boredom. Tara looked the way out. Tara's parents reach the ashram and yell stating that they cannot bear the thought of her staying there anymore, as among these of foreigners and whores. They also prompt her that she has shamed the family's reputation and she should return to her husband house as soon as possible. Tara ignores them stating that the ashram is her home, baba would be her father and the sanyasi's would be her family. Antara's artistic skill was learned from Kali meta. She started to paint and collected the pictures of baba.

Those cottons were coarse. The whites are still white, the white of widowers of mourners and renunciants, holy men and women monks and nuns, the white of those who no longer belong in the world. Here the narrators white denotes baba's followers but Tara's white color denotes truth, a blank state of where she could remark herself and finds the path of freedom and this was the color of her community. This white is what that separated Tara from her family and everyone else, that made her life feels like prison of white color.

Antara suffered extremely during this period without her mother's warmth. Tara finds liberation in these squalid circumstances, and it is hard for Antara to distinguish between her mother's pursuit of self-determination and acts of selfishness. When Antara could not see her mother for a week, she feels her mom has forgotten her. Antara cries for her mother, and is strongly opposed by ashram. "Why do they want us keep separate? Why does only baba get to have her?" (105)

Once, Antara was completely restricted by everyone but later, she never failed look after her mother Tara who failed to feed milk to the hungry child. At the age of seven, Antara in ashram was not happy she stayed up all the night huddling by a corner all by her own. She wept without food, water and sleep. Kali Meta threatens her not to be so ungrateful. She was asked to look after by herself, she had to do it for baba and her mom Tara.



Antara bathes herself even during monsoon, she learned to wash her own clothes. Kali Meta taught her how to hold a pencil and to control her hyper-extended thumb. Soon Antara finds her motherhood in Kali Mehta. That was tremendous exposure for Antara that she was not allowed to look at her mother at all or even to know where she was. She learnt not to ask questions even if she wanted answers. She takes immense risk to bring back her mother's memories despite looking after her very own family.

"You better eat when you're told, you better be a good girl" (107). Tara says to Antara, when she secretly met her daughter when Tara was half asleep. Kali Meta joined the conversation with Tara about the golden one, the new favorite who would be taking Tara's place, who would now live on the other carved door with baba. It has decided. Tara and Antara left the ashram.

The homeless women lived at platforms of Poona Club, Tara took her daughter along with her for begging. On the very first day they learned some rules for begging. Antara and her mother are dealing with societal constraints which seem tied to Indian culture and yet also seem very universal.

Once she had a chance to meet her husband and he took them to Nani's house where Antara finds peace of living her life with love and protection. Tara stays awake all nights trying to contact her husband. Unfortunately, it ends in a sense of responsibility that her father holds as an envelope of money. Antara feels pity on her life without her parents and discerns two facts that her parents were no longer married and her father had found a new wife, just like baba had. "When a husband and wife are not husband and wife anymore, I said, does that mean that a father is no longer a father?" (149)

Tara shifts her home from Nani to her own with help of some concessions from ashram. Kali Meta would frequently visit them. She brings books and games that Antara would have never seen. Kali Meta does everything on behalf of Tara, who failed to fulfill the wishes of her very own daughter. Eventually Antara too learned the habit of smoking from her mother. The information of baba's death shakes Tara, but not Antara. There are controversies between a devotee Tara and rebellious Antara who has now grown up and learnt to acknowledge practical things. The death of man is common and it looks cheap even and was definitely nothing to brag about baba's death, according to Antara, but as a lover of great man, Tara got curious as she says "You're a fat, little bitch. Have some sympathy! I became a widow today!" (152)

Doshi vaguely names the enigmatic guru Baba, but the shadowy activities she describes at the ashram resemble those of the followers of the controversial Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. In the most skilled parts of the novel, she describes the bizarre behavior of the worshipper's behavior like foolishly laughing, clapping, bare-breasted devotees writhing on floors, the western dabblers



who wear jeans under their kurtas, the tearful women who clutch at Baba's feet. Writing from Antara's perspective, Doshi allows us to see the scene both through the lens of her childish incomprehension and as a strange mysticism.

The ashram scenes are, by far, the most intriguing part of the novel, but Doshi, disappointingly, doesn't allow readers to linger here, refusing perhaps to indulge any appetite for the reader on exoticism or prurience. What interests her is how, in these squalid circumstances, Tara finds liberation, and how hard it is for Antara to distinguish between her mother's pursuit of self-determination and acts of selfishness. When Baba dies, Tara lashes out, slapping the seven year old Antara and calling her a fat little bitch. Tara is monstrous, but the strength of Doshi's book is that it resists showing only monstrosity. Her spare and unsentimental writing allows a glimpse of something more the suffocation of motherhood and frustrations depicted so powerful she would bang her body against the wall and scream silently to herself.

Eventually, the character learns how to enter the society. The novel ends with the character evaluating herself and her new place in society. It ends on a positive note Tara longs for a family around herself, she had a relationship with a man called Reza pine, besides her apartment. He is young photo journalist, travelled to Ayodhya in northern India to witness the demolition of the mosque and the rallies to celebrate Rama's birth place. Once again unbothered about Antara, Tara shares a bed with a man expecting that he will stay with him forever. He cared for the family of Antara and constructed a happy life but only for months.

Tara wonders what might be reason for her mother to fall for Reza, other than he is a skilful artist. Somehow Reza's harmonious approach influenced Antara too. She joined in school of art and now that helps her to bring memories of her Alzheimer diseased mother through her drawings when things cannot be spoken to make Tara remember her past. Antara did some doodles as a memory recreation and that picture seem so offensive that she cannot let it pass. It is a picture of a person that really bothers her. "No one. No one to me anyway. He's a man my mother once knew. They used to be lovers" ( 225)

It was the picture of Reza pine sharing bed with Tara, later she lost him. Tara watched the activities along with her husband Dilip hiding behind. Tara throws the balled papers into the flame , drawings of Antara kept for the art gallery are destroyed into white ashes. The efforts of bringing her past memories were successful but eventually ruined her career in the field of art. Years of studies, preparatory sketches, some more than ten years old vanished overnight. All the images that were a record of moments in Antara's life, memories in her life, memories but also her future, the building of self- made women in society have been lost.

Dementia, though, is the novel's real impasse and Doshi handles this thoughtfully. Although Tara's illness recalibrates their relationship, it never permits Antara the restitution she needs. She notes how she has taken to referring to Tara in the past tense, because 'I am grieving' she observes, 'but it's too early to burn the body'. Dementia means that there is no reckoning, no settlement. Tara's degenerated memory erases their shared history, both the small joys and the deep wounds, but Antara is still living it, processing it, unable to forgive.

The end suggests a productive, happy future. Antara got married to a young, handsome and upper-class guy, Dilip who knew the life history of the women. He pretends that he knows nothing and sits back and watches the play of the women. Tara gives birth to a baby girl, "She looks a little like Ma, and like Nani. The beginning of life so closely resembles the end" (259).

After the birth Tara slowly recovers with happiness. Tara names her daughter 'Antara' not because she loved the name because she hated herself. She wanted her child's life should be different from that of hers. Antara would be un- Tara (unlike Tara). But in the process of separating them, they pitied for each other toward the end. They named the new born as 'Annika'. The varied thoughts on new born exist, as Antara's mother-in-law considered that the new born can be called Annie and decides her future stating that Annie will seem to be more stylish when she leaves abroad. Nani looks at the new born name as the meaning of Goddess Durga. However, Google shows it as biography of an American porn star making Antara angry.

Tara resists the abnegations of marriage and refuses the demands of motherhood. She refuses to apologise, too. This leaves Antara at an impasse. "Where do we go from here?" she wonders. But it is an impasse at which she will also find herself. Struggling with her own newborn, she admits, "I am tired of this baby." She longs for it to walk, eat, bathe, "have her own life, go off in the world". The thinking of Tara and Antara seems to be same when Antara gave birth to her child.

It is true that the injustice being failed by faulty parents is maddening. It's irresolvable too, but in the novel's very fine closing scenes, a reluctant understanding. Finally it is bounded with sorrowful, sceptical and electrifyingly truthful about mother and daughter.

At the start of the book, sympathies lay on Antara. Her mother's choices had made her childhood miserable, nightmarish and full of uncertainty. It's difficult to blame her for resenting her mother. Caring for a relative with Alzheimer's must be extraordinarily difficult in any case, and if particularly like the person anyway, it becomes even more dreadful.

Finally by providing the perfect judgement that why Antara questions whether she has to take on this enormous burden when Tara was quite a selfish and loveless mother to her. *Girl in White Cotton* is the opinion of both Tara and Antara to relate both characters in different ways. It

seems almost as though they are cosmically pitted against one another, only one of them can truly live, and always at the expense of the other.

Kamala Markandayan's *possession* also states the relevant story line, all about the growth of protagonist, Valmiki. How he faces difficulties and problems in his life. And going through the ladder of success and experiencing reality of the outside world how he understands the ways of life. When Valmiki achieves self realization then he return to his native place. There is also conflict between spirituality and materialism. At the end it is spirituality wins over worldly things. This shows that Valmiki at the end of fiction becomes a mature person as like Tara's end. "Independent women must expect more of themselves, since neither men nor other more conventionally domesticated women will hope for anything, or expect any result other than utter failure" (121).

A typical Entwicklungsroman work, *Great Expectations* tells the story of a young man who undergoes a quest for maturity and knowledge of the world. By accepting his own weaknesses, Pip is able to succeed. He not only travels through Britain, but also through the different social layers and even though he ends up at the bottom of the ladder, he is much wiser than before and has learned that a considerable fortune cannot buy happiness. The narrators' age and degree of maturity change throughout the novel, which explains why he is in the end able to critically reflect and comment on his youth self-experiences.

Similarly, here Tara suffers pain from past due to her wrong perception of modern world when freedom is taken for granted, only at the verge of life she understood the conceptual life and morality of living. She was ignorant and adamant teenager rebellious nature, that offspring to beg in streets and sleep on platform lanes. With multiple insults, frustrations, hatred by each and everyone whom she loved, right from her family members to her beloved daughter to turn to hate her. But then she could able to manage herself by forgetting the past in later part of the novel resulting to the maturity of the character.

Here, the Entwicklungsroman is used from Tara as a rebellious teenager that passes to unhitching the wish of wedding bells, which is a failure one that holds a long baggage to Tara's escapism where self realization begins there, by the turbulence of a child and renunciation of mother added with halting disappointments finally ends with evolution of Tara.

This paper deals about Tara's journey of her life and her way of looking at modern world from cradle to autumn of life, by mocking societal norms later resulting to the evolution of Tara turned matured women, one who initially takes freedom for granted. It offers, two milestone of life one is a pessimistic approach of living, that is to find any loop holes to escape from hectic situation like Tara and the other is optimistic approach, fight, pardon, live and loot the

opportunities wisely like Antara, it is left within the hands of people to go either like Tara or Antara.

Tara's evolution that employed through Entwicklungsroman's theory in the novel *Girl in White Cotton* that makes the novel more alluring and effective added with symbolic references and flow of narration. It directly spoke about women who entangle herself into the modern world. This work acts as an arbitrator to readers that threaten modern living that is spoken through the character of Tara. A climax does not have any twist or an entirely unimaginable solution. How it balances the story and how impactful the purpose of the character is delivered that one can find impressive in this work. The significant part of this work traces out that essentiality of parenting and unspoken truth of women when freedom is taken for granted.

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