

A Critical Reading of Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America*—A Woman's Journey in the Light of Bildungsroman

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ABSTRACT:

This paper analyses *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* written by the reputable Egyptian Professor of Women's Studies in religion at Harvard University: Leila Ahmed (1940---). Ahmed gives her narration the form of a memoir. *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America-- A Woman's Journey* tells of her long and safe travel from her eastern culture to a more surpassing, and superior western culture. She begins her personal journey paying farewell as an immigrant who has lost intimacy with homeland and readily gained knowledge of both the language and culture contrary to her own. She embarks upon her journey with a definite resolution of not returning back and droven by ceaseless ambition, and endless keen on learning. Amidst her life and study in America, Ahmed reconsiders all her preconceived judgment concerning relation and appreciation of her country.

Key words: Bildungsroman – autobiography – imperialism – education - childhood – adolescence – maturation.

This paper detects some aspects of the postcolonial genre of Bildungsroman as exercised in Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey*. There are many definitions for Bildungsroman, they mostly bear commonality about its evolutionary nature. James Hardin describes it as a "development of the collective name for the values of a special people of social stratum in a given historical epoch and by the extension the achievement of learning about the same body of knowledge" (Thamarana xii).

There are many examples of famous novels that have been categorised as models of Bildungsroman. One of the features delineating the portrait of the protagonist in the Bildungsroman is that he belongs to the lower strata of the society. Unlikely, Ahmed was born in 1940 in Cairo to an upper middle class Egyptian family and has lived the early years of her life in the outskirts of Cairo. Such place and time hold firm association with the cultural ground from which Ahmed had been nurtured. Ahmed divides her memoir into two main parts of twelve chapters and an epilogue. In her search for herself and her genuine cultural values, she introduces the memoir with some insinuating lines from Rumi's poem 'The song of the reed' (mentioned at the first page of the novel) which bears evidence to her final resolution:

To hear the song of the reed
everything you have ever known
must be left behind.

She visualises her narrative recollection with images of the landscape of Heliopolis during her childhood in the 1940s when it was large and tolerable to involve other religious and ethnic groups. It is the Cairene society which no longer exists. The infinite nature of the country fields at the foreground of her family's house and the desert extending at the back suggests the heroine's imminent wandering. In contrast to the well-to-do economic, cultural condition of Ahmed's family house was the impoverished, state of the neighbouring village of Matariyya which kept Ahmed informed with the terrible realities of life of depravity, maladies, and death.

In Camella Brandstone's words," the original model for the protagonist of the Bildungsroman is male hero as the genre has been male dominated"(Brandstone 5). Also Ellen Morgan in 1972 viewed

the female Bildungsroman as a "recasting" of predominantly male genre and the rise of the genre as an index to change social economic realities"(Morgan 276). Though having a female protagonist is of scarcity, but it was previously trodden ever since Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre.

In the first chapter of the memoir entitled 'In the House of Memory', Ahmed recollects her early adolescent years in Egypt. She analyses the cultural devices which have been inculcated into her norms and taste by her parents. Her adolescence was not orchestrated up to the traditional eastern gender male bias, as Judith Halberstam writes, "an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson of restraint, punishment, and repression"(Halberstam 938).

Contrary to the rigidity of the conservative Egyptian social customs concerning girls, Ahmed was raised up in a rather modernised life style. Ahmed never tried any gender discrimination. Her father admires her inquisitive manner and calls her the "the Wise Owl" (Ahmed (57). There is another aspect differentiating between Ahmed's account and other female Bildungsroman protagonists. In Felski's words, "trajectory remains limited to the journey from the parental to the marital home and... her destiny remains linked to that of her male companion" (Felski 125). In this sense, Ahmed's protagonist differs from the bulk of the familiar female Bildungsroman protagonist. Like Jane Eyre who begins her journey "questioning of rules and conventions" (Watkins), Ahmed had a similarly daring beginning groping for self affirmation. What distinguishes Ahmed's Bildungsroman is that she broadened the scope of her investigation from the narrowness of the self to the broad horizon of country.

According to Gohlman, any novel containing a young hero (usually male), a wide range of experiences and a sense of the ultimate practical value of these experiences in later life can be said to belong to the Bildungsroman genre"(Gohlman 4). Ahmed provides versatile cultural examples which influenced her upbringing: the first is her father who was highly impressed by the European civilization. The second is her Christian Yugoslavian Nanny; the third is that deeply rooted eastern temperament of her mother.

Paradoxically, although Ahmed's father was gravely stirred by the savage episode of Dinshwai in 1906; he, like all Egyptians wept, "the whole country plunged into mourning"(Ahmed 44). He, himself, experienced "British injustice"(Ahmed 45). Yet, he took great concern in advancing her linguistic skill of both English and French. Likewise, she finds it incongruous that her father who held genuine reverence to the Quran, and his mastery of Arabic paid little heed to her inadequacy in Arabic; she couldn't read her father's memoir because she finds "cursive Arabic hard to read" (Ahmed 23). Early exposure to the western civilization and gaining command in English paved the way for Ahmed to cohere with the European environment. What Ahmed's father did for optimising his daughter's taste and learning has been indicted by postcolonial critics who perceive Bildungsroman with its "social education and progress (bildung') of its protagonist. ... with its emphasis on cultivation, coherence and maturity ... lends itself to the creation and reproduction of the justification of imperialism" (Mullaney 31).

Ahmed openly gives some self-criticism of her childhood's cultural and linguistic rearing: "English was valued above Arabic in ways that would have marked it, in a child's mind at least, as being somehow innately a 'superior' language" (Ahmed 23). With all her love, respect and admiration for her father, she admits the following statement: "My father, had not merely admired European Civilisation, but had probably internalized the Colonial beliefs about the superiority of European civilization" (Ahmed 25).

Next comes Ahmed's governess who captures a highly influential space in her cultural formation. The third chapter of the memoir called 'In Expectation of Angels' Ahmed describes her Nanny as her "closest companion" (Ahmed 64). Ahmed's solitary childhood makes similarity with the young protagonist of the traditional Bildungsroman who feels loneliness. Their deep connection enabled Ahmed to listen to her Nanny' personal monologues and even caught her loneliness and feeling of "left out"(Ahmed 66). This was customary in those days since literate Nannies were tasked with taking care of the children and monitoring their behaviour. Ahmed recalls that during her early childhood she got into a state of panic in fear of her Nanny's death. Ridiculously, when it comes to some dispute with Ahmed's mother, leaving Ahmed with what she called "fine legacy of anxieties" (Ahmed 56). Ahmed even identified herself

with her lonely Nanny: "And what did it mean .. that Nanny could be dismissed? Who else could be dismissed? Could I be dismissed? I think I felt that I occupied some marginal space" (Ahmed 57). She remembers her terrible fears of losing her Nanny. Upon Ahmed's loneliness in England, she felt remorse for not providing the best companionship for her solitary Nanny.

Differences in religion between Ahmed and her Nanny acquainted Ahmed, in her young age, into the experience of diversity. Her Nanny exercised the moral codes dictated by her mother and happened to be typical to those of the Nanny. She was conservative and cautious not to stir any religious problematic issue. Ahmed's adoration for her Nanny did not, negatively, affect her religious and moral composition. It only, for a time, increased her estrangement from her Egyptian surroundings and affected her relationship with her mother. This does not mean that Ahmed totally agreed with all her Nanny's viewpoints.

She begins to re-consider the past in an unbiased manner. Formerly, she used to perceive her mother as a passive spectator. She mentions an incorrect judgement of her mother: "how terrible to do nothing with one's life, to just sit there, passively watching the television" (Ahmed 21). She probably was affected by her Nanny's dislike of her mother; "she regarded Mother as an idle woman of the spoiled upper classes"(Ahmed 54). For either personal or ethnic based reasons, Ahmed's Nanny, with the exception of Ahmed's mother, had vulnerability to persons with blue eyes. Unlike Ahmed, she held respect for hierarchies especially to "boyness as opposed to girlness" (Ahmed 53). But Nanny was a fine observer and commentator of Politics. She hated communism, Hitler and Tito and this certainly enriched Ahmed's liberal mind.

Contrary to Ahmed's father and her Nanny, comes the writer's mother who displayed genuine love and reverence to the Arabic music and to the Egyptian singer Um Kolsoum which were considered by the daughter and her colleagues as associated with "the streets ... from radios in the baladi, the unsophisticated regions of the town" (Ahmed 24). Her mother always "cherished and honoured her own heritage" (Ahmed 25).

Ahmed pays both her native tradition and her mother an apology. Ahmed eventually reevaluates her mother's cultural attitude. For a

long time, the writer felt horrified of being modelled on her mother's domesticity. This is part of what Ahmed later on begins to consider as "false perceptions and old, unexamined prejudices...prejudice even against our own kind and the most cherished people in our lives"(Ahmed 24).

The genre of Bildungsroman often features the protagonist in a clash with the society. Ahmed, probably, did not feel wholly comfortable at the Cairene surroundings outside her family house, but she held no enmity against the society at large. Ahmed held antagonism with the Egyptian political regime of her early twenties. She names dictatorship, bureaucracy, and corruption as some of the drawbacks she indicted in Egypt. Absence of democracy was part of Ahmed's early admiration with what Moretti calls 'the myth of modernity' (Moretti 159).

Politics intersects with Ahmed's personal life. In her analysis of the political mobility in Egypt in the 1950s, she narrates how politics corrupted her national zeal and played a negative major role in her early years in Egypt. The 1952 Egyptian revolution is the political nightmare which irritated Ahmed's early life. First, the new revolutionists declared their adherence to socialism. Laws were decreed against landowners forcing them to give away the biggest part of their lands. As Ahmed analyzes, the extreme application of this ideology proved catastrophic. In the middle of her study in England, she had to witness the collapse of her childhood romantic world. Her family's life was turned to hell at the hands of the new Egyptian regime. Then comes the big crisis of the High Dam; such a huge Egyptian national project. Her father was a stubborn opponent to its building in the peak of Gamal Abdel Nasser's national glory. He proved through intensive scientific researches that the project's excessive environmental losses would exceed its gains.

Her father's objection to the project brought the whole family unpredictable disasters. In her visit to her parents in Egypt, she had to pay for her father's unyielding situation against the project. The father felt that he had unintentionally caused his daughter great harm. Beside financial difficulties, she spent four years attempting to re-issue her passport. She describes the 'Mogammaa' where she tried to re-issue her passport as " the emblem and, for me, the very heart of the revolution's abuse of power and of its concealed, diffuse malevolence" (Ahmed 27). A new awareness of her social, and

political alienation overwhelmed her. The view of her terribly deceased father, and her helpless mother dismays her. What irritates her most is the threat of not resuming her study in England and the bleakness of her future career in the light of such political harassment.

One aspect of Ahmed's maturation emerges when she begins analysing the key moments in the Egyptian national history. She heard many actual versions of the aggression of the British mandate during Dinshway from her father and his elite colleagues. In the second chapter of the Memoir 'From Colonial to Post Colonial', Ahmed recounts it first through the innocent eyes of a teenager: "I was hurt the way one is when has trusted and being betrayed by friend" (Ahmed 170). Later on, upon narrates the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 castigating the aggression as " the moral defeat of the European powers and the public exposure, on the world stage, of their hectoring tyranny towards countries under their domination"(Ahmed 32). The nationalisation of the Suez Canal was one of the steps Nasser has taken against imperialism.

Ahmed discusses the pro and con of Abdul Nasser's policies. In his fight against imperialism, Nasser claimed for a Pan Arabism national attitude linking Egypt to the rest of the Arab world. His era witnessed the emergence of a collective Arabic identity as one important mean of fighting imperialism. Ahmed also elucidates that Nasser's decree of socialist laws did not prove successful. It hardly affected the poor's life. According to the writer, Nassir's fervent wish for an exclusively Arabic plurality, he had not done full justice to the richness and complexity of the Egyptian heritage. He has been enforcing another kind of racial exclusion in his reaffirmation of the Arabic cultural and ethnic roots of Egypt. She also could not overlook Nasser's dictatorship.

Marianne Hirsch defines the Bildungsroman as a novel that deals with "the idea of the young adult protagonist rebelling against a powerful authoritative force while seeking to develop an identity" (Hirsch 295). The peak of her disillusionment brings her decision to leave Egypt for good. She considers immigration, but it was not possible for political reasons. The moment she decides to send herself into voluntary exile from Egypt after getting a one-year scholarship from the British Council. As she was sitting in a plane at Cairo

airport, she writes "Finally, I just wanted the engines to start up, the plane to take off. I wanted to be out of Egypt"(Ahmed 207).

Success was her goal in her new life in England. After attaining self-achievement as she could register for the doctoral degree instead of the M.Litt. Seriousness, diligence and hard work helped her overcome many obstacles. Unexpectedly, what caused her grievance most was the increase of bias that the Europeans exercised against the Arabs. This was the reason which urged her to explore Egypt's heritage. Ahmed's pride is cherished by the immense of its cultural facets and its diversity. She finds enormous store of versatility, originality and uniqueness. In *A Borders Passage*, she mentions many Egyptian famous figures who launched modernity in Egypt. She mentions the name of Khedive Ismael who emulated the exotic European architectural designs into Egypt. The name of the architect Hassan Fathi whose interaction with the western art of architecture produced creativity and originality more fitting to the Egyptian environment.

Ahmed conceptualizes the battle running in Egypt between the forces eager for change and mobility against the radical dogma of some reactionaries. Her father initiated the westernised norms of the English dress. He himself, used to stand opposite to the conservative Egyptian thinker Ahmed Amin who in the early 1950s declared his hatred for the Christians and the West. For Ahmed, this was alien to the Egyptian society. Paradoxically, she ran into a similar racist experience targeting her Arab identity and transformed her western biases. With all her infatuation with the western movies, she feels injured by the immense misrepresentation of the Arabs in the western books, movie and media. She complains "I, like many I know who are Arab, never go to a film in which I know that Arabs or Muslims figure. Naturally--- why would I want to subject myself to the lies and racism that all too often are part of such thing?"(Ahmed 268-9).

The eleventh chapter of *A Border's Passage* entitled *On Becoming an Arab* brings the catalytic moments in Ahmed's quest for Egypt's identity. She initiates the chapter with Zora Neale Hurston's words "I remember the very day that I became colored"(Ahmed 243). She recollects an old situation in 1952 in which she was reproached and even struck at her face by her Palestinian teacher for being not proficient at Arabic. Ahmed recognizes that despite all the massive passionate zeal for "Al_qawmiyya al_Arabiyya! Arab nationalism!"

(Ahmed 244), Ahmed's family refused to yield to this new cult. When she left Egypt, she felt angry at what the Egyptian media for what she considered as cultural brain wash. This stubborn attitude of Ahmed's family was not arbitrarily taken.

Later on, Ahmed recollects how the propaganda recommending the Arabic identity excluded all other ethnic roots except the Arabic language and the religion of Islam as the basic component of the Egyptian identity. She recollects the cosmopolitan picture of Egypt in the 1940s in which there was one unifying Egyptian identity of different roots and religions. She explains that, upon leaving Egypt, she deliberately ignored her Arabic identity since by being Arab, it meant despising both the Copts and the Egyptian Jews. She writes "Jews and Copts were not, to me, abstractions. They were people my parents knew and saw, and talked about" (Ahmed 245). The resentment of Ahmed's family of the new identity was not individually taken, it was the sentiment of a whole class. "Was this a class issue? Were they part of some elite milieu which imagined they were Egyptian while 'the masses' knew all along that they were Arab?" (Ahmed 246). Ahmed concludes that by rejecting racism, she, unconsciously developed a racist attitude. She finally settles all the confusion surrounding her identity saying "For no matter how carefully I examined my memories and feelings, they remained opaque until I took this journey into history and into the history of the world of my childhood" (Ahmed 246).

The reason for attributing Ahmed's narrative work to the postcolonial genre of the Bildungsroman is that the work bears some of the narrative strands of this genre. It includes many of the traditional features of the genre of Bildungsroman except for two differences related to the modesty of the protagonist social background and the nature of the protagonist clash with the social system. Moreover, Ahmed writes it in the form of an autobiography in which she uses real names of persons, real places, and real events, it tells of a personal experience. Nevertheless, the memoir documents a rather collective experience of persons who lived during that 1950s in Egypt and witnessed the transformation of Egypt's cultural identity. It demarcates an important political, social, and cultural phase in the history of Egypt, it cannot be considered as a mere autobiography.

Ahmed fleshes out her passage into maturation with daring clarity, freshness and ease. She calls her voyage "a personal odyssey" (Ahmed 246). What distinguishes Ahmed's Bildungsroman is that her own personal recognition is not separate from that of her country. Being a female writer of Bildungsroman does not eliminate her experience to one particular gender. The cultural experience of her early years in Egypt protects Ahmed from any gender bias. As a female protagonist, she does not fix that binary relationship between the males and females. She experienced another antithetic cultural clash between being Egyptian and being an Arab.

In conclusion, Ahmed's cultural experiences are worthy of study and admiration, as they highlight the spiritual and mental evolution of an immigrant re-digging into her roots and history. Unlike the ordinary protagonist of the Bildungsroman, Ahmed recognizes that she did not leave behind a narrow or small world, she left a country steeped in deep rooted heritage with versatile offsprings. Ahmed's evolution is mixed with a touch of profundity.

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