



Universidad
del País Vasco

Euskal Herriko
Unibertsitatea



CHALLENGING THE COMING-OF-AGE: SIMILITUDES AND DIVERGENCES OF CONTEMPORARY FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN WITH TRADITIONAL INSTANCES

Author: Maider Matas Herrero

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Tutor: Cristina Jarillot Rodal

Department of English and German Studies and Translation and Interpretation

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0. Abstract

The Bildungsroman is a literary genre that embraces those narratives dealing with the process of formation and self-development of its protagonist, narrating his or her journey from childhood to adulthood. The Bildungsroman, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, has been evolving and adjusting itself to new historical, social and literary contexts. Thus, a comparative analysis of two innovative female Bildungsroman (*Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street*) will be carried out in order to analyse the manners in which the genre has evolved since its origins, studying their similitudes and the challenges for genre-tradition that divergences might occasion. The findings obtained from the analyses prove that contemporary women-centred and produced Bildungsromane, such as *Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street*, a) distance themselves from some traditional notions and b) apply an unprecedented perspective to the coinciding traditional features inside the genre of the Bildungsroman.

1. Introduction

The Bildungsroman is a literary genre that embraces those narratives dealing with the process of formation and self-development of its protagonist. Also called novels of formation or coming of age narratives, these works portray the protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood. This section is devoted to explore the different periods and ruling trends of the Bildungsroman, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. By doing so, a broad scope of the history of the Bildungsroman will be achieved, which will be useful in order to compare and contrast traditional coming-of-age narratives with contemporary female Bildungsromane.

1.1 Historical Context

a) 18th Century: Traditional Bildungsroman

Even though the main premise of the genre might appear quite clear, the Bildungsroman has been subject to controversy since its first introduction to the literary criticism realm. This did actually happen in 1820, when Professor Karl von Morgenstern coined the term Bildungsroman while describing fiction that, until the nineteenth century, was not classified as a closed, complete genre (Eysturoy, 6). *The History of Agathon* (1766-67), by Wieland, can be considered as the first instance of Bildungsroman (Enciclopedia Britannica), but it was not after a century that the genre would be considered as such. Dilthey, who in 1870 popularized the term after Morgenstern's explanation, argued that Morgenstern was indeed correct in his affirmation that narratives sharing themes with *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, by Goethe, should conform a literary genre distinguished by its focus on "the Bildung [development] of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness (...)" (Köhn, in Eysturoy, 6).

Dilthey did suggest two literary works as canonical Bildungsromane: the previously mentioned *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96); and *Hyperion* (1797-99), by Hölderlin (Boes, 232). These productions show that "[a] regular development is observed in the life of the individual" and that they are "(...) a product of sociological circumstances that obtained only in the German principalities" (Boes, 232). Moreover, these two canonical novels share the same process of their protagonist's development. According to Dilthey, these processes are founded on values from the Enlightenment (Boes,

232): they are certain kind of scientific processes (Kontje, on Boes, 232), organised in different stages of maturity (Tennyson, on Eysturoy, 8) and with the subject's fitting in society as their main outcome (Gallego, 64).

b) *19th Century: Broadening the Bildungsroman*

During the nineteenth century, realist literature started to flourish in England and France. The resemblance between realist themes and the traditional Bildungsroman did not go unperceived. In fact, important realist novels such as *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and *Great Expectations* (1860-61), both by Dickens, and *Sentimental Education* (1869), by Flaubert; made an emphasis on the main protagonist's development. Nonetheless, it is true that the process of formation was not portrayed as the only important theme in these works. This issue was tackled by Buckley, who aimed for a more flexible model as a response to the traditional Bildungsroman. He proposed a list of themes that should be also taken into consideration when considering a novel as Bildungsroman. Thus, the process of development, as Dickens and Flaubert demonstrated in their works, shall now be accompanied by themes such as "childhood, the conflict of generations, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for vocation and a working philosophy" (Buckley, on Boes, 232).

Moreover, through the inclusion of new themes and the acceptance of other European novels as contributions to the canon, denationalization of the genre was achieved. This led to the dismissal of the socio political precondition for the Bildungsroman, for the German historical background is proved dispensable for its production. Nevertheless, expanding the theme-barrier of the Bildungsroman was not the single consequence of accepting some European realist novels into the canon. Although one of the pivotal themes in all *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *Sentimental Education* is still the main characters' development, the processes through which it is carried out differ from the traditionally German one. The Bildung is no longer attached to those Enlightenment values which claimed that the individual will find his own identity when he is finally engaged in society (Pascal, on Gallego, 64). Instead, the protagonist is now shaped in accordance to Dickens's and Flaubert's times: Romanticism. In fact, opposition to the ideals of Enlightenment and the consequences of the Romantic period's policies "(...) led to the creation of novels that featured self-involved protagonists who withdraw from active engagement with the social world" (Dilthey, on Boes, 232). These claims demonstrate that the main character of the Bildungsroman is constantly changing

and adjusting himself to his social and historical background, evolving from “traditional metropolitan novels of formation and social affirmation to increasingly global and fragmentary narratives of transformation and rebellion” (Boes, 231).

c) *Early 20th Century: First Innovations*

Modernist literature, in relation with the Bildungsroman, has provided the world with important works. To name a few, *Demian* (1919), by Hermann Hesse, and *The Magic Mountain* (1924), by Thomas Mann, are of high importance for comparison with traditional novels of formation. Researchers like Boes have pointed out that these authors were inspired by Dilthey’s approach and thus, Wilhelm Meister’s model, when adjusting modernist features (the introspection of the main character) and devices (interior monologues, the stream of consciousness) to the traditional Bildungsroman (231). As a result, both *Demian* and *The Magic Mountain* share the conventional aesthetical precondition of a male protagonist experiencing a process of development that might affect his physical, psychological, moral or social features. However, if until this moment the theme of the opposition individual-society was key for the triggering of the Bildung, the process is now more centred in the individual, the subjectivity and the relationship with the protagonist himself. The main characters still analyse their social backgrounds, and their social concerns are still very present in the novels. Nonetheless, they are narrated through much more subjective and personal techniques, so that both the protagonist and the process of formation are, once more, modified and adjusted to a historic period where psychological studies and literary innovation were prominent.

d) *20th Century: The New Bildungsroman*

Other modernist literary productions such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), by James Joyce, or *Amerika* (1927), by Franz Kafka, have been also compared with instances of traditional Bildungsroman. However, they present variables in the conventional aesthetic precondition of the genre: the Bildung is sometimes tinkered with themes such as racial identity, strong political opinions and the search for the meaning of life, as these two novels do perfectly reflect. Moreover, with this continuum of themes, Joyce and Kafka achieve to set the path for the next decade’s principal concern in the Bildungsroman: post colonialism, immigration, the pursuit of one’s own identity and achieving formation from alternative fields such as art (Künstlerroman), as both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Amerika* resemble.

A turning point for the understanding of the Bildungsroman appeared around the 1980s (Boes, 233). It was the weight of structuralism what led the Bildungsroman to this crossroad, where the final outcome was that of addressing the genre “no longer merely as an inductive and taxonomic construct”, highlighting the need for analysing “large-scale symmetries across European traditions” in order to properly define the Bildungsroman (Boes, 234). Therefore, in order to constitute well-defined premises and characteristics for the genre, the focus was no longer on literary criticism like Dilthey’s or Buckley’s, but on significant narratives that shaped the brand new canon.

1.2 Female Bildungsroman

It was not until the debacle of the conventional model that women were noticed in the Bildungsroman. Even though female characters did actually appear on coming-of-age narratives, their relation with the process of formation of the main protagonist (or Bildungsheld) was not a subject of matter, if it did even exist.

In their untiring effort on emphasizing Enlightenment ideologies, both authors and critics of the Bildungsroman viewed maturation as the process of becoming a “unified, masculine, white, middle-class self” (Snircová, 135). This humanist approach towards the Bildung justified, to certain extent, the absence or disregarding of female characters during the eighteenth century Bildungsromane. Adding to this argumentative line, Dilthey claimed that women were not able to appear as the focus of a coming-of-age narrative because of their lack of freedom for experiencing those vital experiences that would lead the male to his process of self-development (Gallego, 63). This idea would be further analysed by Moretti nearly two centuries later, clarifying that

(...) for a long time, the west European middle-class man held a virtual monopoly of these [experiences], which made him a sort of structural *sine qua non* of the genre (on Snircová, 137).

Similarly, Buckley excluded the female figure from his analyses on the construction of the Bildungsroman (Boes, 234). Regardless of the progressive raising of “awareness of the complexities of personal development” (Snircová, 135) during the nineteenth century, Buckley implicitly suggested that women were not yet conceivable within the framework of the coming of age narratives. Nonetheless, there were relevant female characters in Bildungsroman-considered narratives indeed. In the case of *The Mill*

on the Floss (1860), by George Elliot, the female heroine is completely neglected by nineteenth century literary criticism for the sake of the process of development of the male protagonist (Boes, 234).

A Room of One's Own (1929), by Virginia Woolf, is finally a clear instance of the success of female attention in the Bildungsroman. Innovative in its modernist structure, this long essay analyses previously mentioned issues regarding the omission of female figures in literature. This progress towards the assumption of the importance of female characters and their processes of development, through the recognition of their lack of presence in preceding Bildungsromane, marks the dawn of a social revolution. Women's social condition, that which avoided them to experience the required experiences for a process of development, is now evolving and adjusting itself to a new era. This period, in fact, did not only facilitate women being the main focus of a Bildungsroman, but also to be aware of their particular Bildung and gain the sufficient agency for writing their own coming of age narratives. The late twentieth century, all in all, constituted a few decades when

women writers have often adapted the basic patterns of traditionally male-defined Bildungsroman, but given the particular nature of female development, women's Bildungsromane have transformed the concept of Bildung and thereby also the traditional definitions of the genre (Eysturoy, 5).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify and analyse the challenges that female contemporary Bildungsroman productions set to the male-centred, traditional Bildungsroman. In order to carry out this task, I will select two novels from the last few decades, *Persepolis* (2000) and *The House on Mango Street* (1984), providing thus an insight on the late twentieth century and the still developing twenty-first century female coming-of-age narratives. Through a comparative analysis, I will study their similarities and divergences on themes, protagonists and the coming of age processes.

2. Selected Novels in Context

2.1 The House on Mango Street (1984), by Sandra Cisneros

This novel by the important Chicana author Sandra Cisneros begins through the voice of Esperanza, who will guide the reader through her experiences on Mango Street, her new neighbourhood where she does not feel comfortable and, thus, aims to escape.

She explains how her family has just moved in a new house on Mango Street, a segregated community where Chicanos are placed inside a larger city in the United States.

The House on Mango Street is a very gradual depiction of Esperanza's process of development. Each chapter hints to a new maturational stage within, and it is not until the last chapters that Esperanza is able to define her future and her role as a woman, writer and Chicana.

2.2 *Persepolis* (2000), by Marjane Satrapi

This novel, a graphic novel in fact, is one of the most well-known works by the Iranian author Marjane Starapi. Marji, or the child version of Marjane herself, will account her experiences (through image and language) from her childhood in Iran to her adolescence in Austria as a refugee and her return to Iran as an adult woman.

The Bildung depicted in Marji's story does also appear as gradual, following an structured pattern of childhood-adolescence-adulthood. However, this fact does not signify that the Bildung process is depicted as traditional, for the events accounted are non-fictional and close in time. Thus, the reader will understand the reality of a child in the Iranian war, the devastating experience of the exile, the confusion of returning to a distant homeland and the unconditional love of a family.

3. Analysis

The outcome of this section will be that of identifying and evaluating the ways in which *The House on Mango Street* and *Persepolis* defy or assimilate traditional approaches of the Bildungsroman. However, I would like to highlight that the mere aspect of these novels being female-produced, female-centred, contemporary Bildungsromane is the onset point for the defeat of tradition. Therefore, even though my theme choice has been motivated in order to explore challenges for tradition, this section will also set a focus on the characteristics that provided both *Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street* with a status of innovative female Bildungsromane.

3.1 *The Bildung – Process of Formation, Maturation and Development*

In *The House on Mango Street*, the narrator, focalizer and protagonist is Esperanza Cordero. This thirteen-year-old young woman will guide us through her experiences in

her new *barrio*, Mango Street, during a period of one year. It is not the same case as in *Persepolis*, where Marjane (or Marji) provides herself an account of her experiences from her childhood to her adulthood. Therefore, it is assumable that by the end of *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's maturational process will not be fully concluded; and that by the end of *Persepolis*, Marji will have completed her Bildung and will have finally matured. In the same way, the reader will only witness Esperanza's first steps towards formation, self-identity and maturation; while a whole scope of Marji's maturational process will be provided in her case.

Esperanza and Marji, from the very first chapters, claim that they are impulsed by one motto, that will stick to them throughout the whole novel. Esperanza is decided to leave Mango Street. She does never formulate explicit claims about leaving, but her determination is actually implicitly present since "The House on Mango Street", the first vignette, where she asserts: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house (...). But this isn't" (Cisneros, 5). As Eysturoy explains, it is her effort invested on being detached from that "sad red house" (Cisneros, on Eysturoy) what will equally alienate and guide her through her Bildung (90-92). Marji, a "female child with radical political beliefs for her time and for her age" (Rizzuto, 3), happens to be more interested on being self-educated (37). Consequently, Esperanza will provide a wider account of experience related to the encouragement or avoidance of her leitmotif; while Marji's stories will emphasize socio-political conflict as the major trigger for self-formation. By proclaiming these issues as their main motivations, both Marji and Esperanza are presented as highly inquisitive and aware of their own situation. Should this be considered an early manifestation of their intelligence, it will be, in fact, the tool that will guide both of the protagonists in their quest. However, the employment of that "tool" differs. While Marji cultivates her intelligence through Marxist education (Rizzuto, 41), proclaiming the comic *Dialectic Materialism* as her favourite (Satrapi, 16), comparing Marx to God (17), or basing all of her evaluations upon socialist belief at a more advanced age (Rizzuto, 37); Esperanza will only be able to use her self-developed power of observation and analysis in order to assess society and take a particular position against it (O'Reilly Herrera, 196). Therefore, the source of Marji's formation can be identified (books and family, mainly), but Esperanza's is confusing. When Esperanza expresses ideas such as "but I know how these things go" (Cisneros, 5) or "the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (10), the reader might not localize the origin of the knowledge

she displays. She demonstrates a knowledge of the world that contrasts with her isolated position from it. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that both of the protagonists' strong determination is not only an indicator of the formation onset, but also of cleverness precocity.

Even though Bildungsroman-familiarized readers would consider the aforementioned as the Bildung initiator, it is important to point out both of the character's self-awareness of the process. Esperanza and Marji will confront several conflict throughout their stories and, gradually, those conflicts are going to shape the pace and quality of their maturational process. Esperanza deals with segregation (Roszak, 65), alienation from her own family and culture (Eysturoy, 62) and the social constrains of her patriarchal society (O'Reilly Herrera, 194). On the other hand, Marji affronts war, political repression, emigration and alienation as a cause from transculturality and culture-specific gender expectations. Hence, bearing in mind the distinct dimensions of the conflicts mentioned, classifying conflict in *The House on Mango Street* as small-scale and, contrastingly, *Persepolis* as big-scale, appears suitable. Furthermore, the setting of both novels could reinforce this hypothesis: while *The House on Mango Street* takes its course in a small, fictional, isolated *barrio* inside a huge city; *Persepolis* is located in Iran, Austria and France - big, real and diverse settings.

However, due to their innocence and early age, their awareness is not fully expanded. Thus, when conflict is presented in both of their stories, they do not seem to understand the real weight of their situation. For instance, Esperanza does not feel attacked nor neglected when men catcall her and try to sexually compromise her girlfriends in "The Family of Little Feet" (Cisneros, 39-42). Besides, Esperanza's tone when narrating her confrontational experiences is never of anger. In fact, in "A Rice Sandwich", the short descriptive sentences she formulates in order to reflect her embarrassment and humiliation resemble disassociation rather than uneasiness, as seen in:

Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and I started to cry. I always cry when nuns yell at me (...). And I said yes and could I please have a Kleenex. (...) lots of boys and girls watched while I cried and ate my sandwich (...)." (Cisneros, 45).

When Esperanza cannot help crying and decides to lie to the nun instead of acknowledging her that the house she was mentioning was not her house, Cisneros

achieves to transmit Esperanza's feelings of conformity and humiliation. Esperanza, rather than taking the nun's scold as an offense, feels more humiliated by the fact that her classmates are watching her cry and decides to distance herself. On the other hand, Marji does neither achieve full awareness of the conflict she is actually experiencing. At first, she would attend her first party and dance among powerful feelings of excitement and joy while Iranian fellow children were being bombed, as pictured in the chapter "The Key" (Satrapi, 98). Therefore, it is arguable that their innocence, sometimes near to self-centredness (Rizzuto, 10), performs in the way of a protective mask to prevent them from their respective realities.

Nevertheless, Marji and Esperanza did not preserve that mask for a long time. Both experience a determinative moment in their childhood that, inevitably, would take their innocence away. Esperanza tries to grow up in an attempt to wear high heels (Cisneros, 39). Nonetheless, it is not until she is sexually assaulted in "Red Clowns" that she suffers her main awakening towards adulthood, as a consequence of that innocence loss. When Esperanza bitterly claims "I wanted to be dead (...) And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn't seem mine either" (Cisneros, 97-98), the reference to the garden as a place for playing can resemble a childhood that will never return, as it seems no longer a place to play after the assault she experiences. Marji, who attends parties and claims that, with her first cigarette, she "kissed childhood goodbye" (Satrapi, 121), will not actually kiss her childhood goodbye until she experiences the bombing of her own neighbourhood and senses the dead body of a neighbour of her same age among the damaged buildings (Rizzuto, 14). When Marji declares "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger" (Satrapi, 146), her ultimate abandonment of innocence can be appreciated. She is finally aware of the suffering of her people and the proximity of that menace. Her pain, which seemed unbearable, marks her final step towards the abandonment of her innocence and childhood, with the impact of the traumatic experience of witnessing a dead body.

3.2 Family

Due to the different roles that Marji's and Esperanza's respective families display in *The House on Mango Street* and *Persepolis*, their relationships can be labelled as pivotal for the general understanding of their divergent Bildung process.

On one side, Esperanza tries to familiarize the reader with her family. She provides a peculiar physical description of the members of her family in “Hairs” (Cisneros, 6-7). By explaining that “everybody in [her] family has different hair” (6), she creates a beautiful metaphor by symbolizing psychological description through the description of their hair. In the vignette “My Name” (Cisneros, 10-11), Esperanza introduces her grandmother, “a wild horse of a woman” (11), resembling the qualities of braveness and strength that, being so rare in her cultural environment, she would like to share with her. However, young Esperanza feels deeply disappointed because of her grandmother’s marriage, which turned the old Esperanza into a mere “fancy chandelier” who “...looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness in their elbow” (11). Esperanza, thus, is unable to identify proper role models in her family, as she does neither want to look like her father and feels slightly ashamed by her sister and mother.

Esperanza turns out to be alienated not only from her own house, but also from her own family. In “The House on Mango Street” (Cisneros, 3-5), the distance towards her family becomes evident in the shift of personal pronouns. Esperanza employs the pronoun “we” when discussing her ideal house, the one described by her parents. Her retrospective includes the experiences of her family in instances such as “we had to leave the flat” or “we were using the bathroom next door” (4). However, when she realizes that the family house they promised perfect “[was] not the way they told at all” (4), she will start her use of the pronoun “I”: “I knew I had to have a real house” (5). From this moment onwards, she will only reflect her own experiences, portraying her pursue of self-identity outside her family, her house and her neighbourhood. This idea has been previously identified and analysed by Eysturoy, who did also notice the sudden turn in the use of the personal pronouns as indicators of the incipient *Bildung* process (90).

On the other side, Marji’s family plays a more important role in both the story and her *Bildung*. While Esperanza’s process of development is marked by her determination for family detachment, Marji’s maturational course would have been impossible with a lack of positive influence from her family. She shares strong bonds with all the family members she describes, especially with her uncle and grandmother. During such a repressive period as the Iranian war, her parents are “very modern and avant-garde” (Satrapi, 6), Marxist and open-minded. They inculcate constant self-questioning and inconformity in her, which will be her two weapons in order to triumph over her

repressive and patriarchal society. As Esperanza, Marji does also experience loss and disappointment when her uncle Anouch is executed (Satrapi, 76) or one of her girlfriends is bombed (146). In her uncle she loses a role model too, like Esperanza experiences with her grandmother, as she claims in “And so I was lost, without any bearings... What could be worse than that?” (Satrapi, 75). Besides, it is this fact that awakens her first attempt of opposing religion, blaming God for her loss (74) and embracing Marx instead. Her parents will often understand her points of view regardless of their own beliefs and traditions, tending to comfort her when she decides to divorce her husband, questions their political approaches or leaves Iran forever.

3.3 Identity and Transculturality

Esperanza, as previously stated, is born in a Mexican community inside another country, through which an image of a *barrio* entrapped in a wider living space is achieved. This metaphorical entrapment does strongly reinforce Esperanza’s escaping goal, bringing out a feeling of claustrophobia hardly bearable. In the same way, she is being raised in a country that does not correspond with the one of her parents; being they unable to renounce to their Mexican heritage. Mango Street attempts to imitate Mexico through the representation of its houses, as Esperanza notices when she tells her sister: “Look at that house, (...), I said, it looks like Mexico... Yes, that’s Mexico all right” (Cisneros, 18). Consequently, it does not result difficult to understand Esperanza’s confusion: she is encouraged to remain in Mexico while she is constantly exposed to what Cañero would address as “the outer Anglo society” (105).

Esperanza does not find her identity as a female writer Chicana inside Mango Street, as she asserts in “I don’t belong here” (107), referring to her perception of not fitting in her neighbourhood. However, she cannot deny her heritage, in the same way in which she cannot avoid her responsibility towards Nenny or innocent, unprotected women in Mango Street. Therefore, she reformulates her initial statement and recognizes: “I don’t ever want to come from here” (107).

In the opposition “belonging-coming from”, the first subject to choice and the later inexorable, the reader can see how Esperanza fights for an identity, being fully aware of all the boundaries imposed to her person. Inside her neighbourhood, she is tackled as a betrayer for aiming to renounce to her own community and culture, as well as an

institution as important as family. Besides, she will also be attacked for challenging the roles assigned to Chicana women, associating her aims for social justice and gender freedom with an individualistic “search for spiritual and social transcendence”; miming the Anglo mainstream, and thus forgetting “her own people, her community” (Cañero, 106).

Outside her neighbourhood and once in the Anglo sphere, Esperanza does also demonstrate awareness of her boundaries imposed: she knows she is unwanted and hence segregated from the big city to the small neighbourhood, as she implicitly suggests in “Four Skinny Trees” (Cisneros, 74). In this vignette, she argues that the trees that are planted in her street resemble “four raggedy excuses planted by the city” (74), transmitting that “the city uses empty gestures to excuse itself from taking any more substantive responsibility for battling ethnic segregation and socioeconomic inequality” (Roszak, 66). Therefore, she clearly bears in mind that her condition in the “outer space” will neither be ideal. Moreover, she is also capable of identifying the stereotypes she is presumed to fulfil in “Those Who Don’t”, where she explains how people outside Mango Street feel when they enter the neighbourhood. Esperanza notices how “they think we’re [the people in Mango Street] dangerous. They think we will attack them...” (Cisneros, 28). In fact, by claiming that these are “stupid people” (76), she acknowledges the falsity and injustice of these preconceived ideas that will function as limitations in the Anglo world.

Marji’s situation, once again, differs in relevant ways. Her family, as Esperanza’s, is very attached to their homeland. Marji learns the story of Iran and is taught to love it through family connections. She is often confused when comparing her own situation as a child with the Iranian conflict, experiencing what Davis regarded as “happy contradictions” of childhood (13): she grows up loving religion (Satrapi, 12), but a genocide is raising in its name; she enjoys childhood, but children are being encouraged to give their lives in the war (Satrapi, 103). When the situation turns extremely dangerous for Marji and her family, she is forced to leave (Satrapi, 157) regardless of her love for her country. Therefore, while Esperanza is expected to stay in a place she does not feel as her own, Marji is forced by her family to leave behind a land where she feels comfortable.

Marji will spend four years in Austria in order to escape the Iranian situation, something that contrasts the “one-year, one-settlement” pattern of *The House on Mango*

Street. In Austria, she experiences several small-scale conflicts that, if compared to the traumatic weight of the Iranian conflict, would appear to the reader as irrelevant. Nevertheless, the continuum of cultural clashes in Austria will bring Marji a sense of self-identity that will be detrimental for her Bildung, as they will create in her a sense of confusion towards identity and morality. Despite her feelings of independency and adulthood, Marji will gradually recognize the cultural difference: she has problems with the language and she is made fun of her accent, her politic ideas are questioned, she is exposed to severe criticism and stereotypes and she feels deeply alone without a family to visit at Christmas.

Nonetheless, Marji will acquire new values during her period in Europe. She will self-question and judge the Iranian society on the basis of these new values, such as political and religious freedom or sexual liberation. However, she will still hold repulsiveness towards the individualistic, self-centred, judgemental European society. Therefore, when she assumes that her assimilation into that society is impossible, reinforcing her Iranian precedence and integrity by replying jokes in her own language, she decides to return to her homeland. For a Marji that had spent her last days in homelessness and had asked her parents for help, her Iranian home would appear as the definitive shelter. To her surprise, she discovers the ultimate disappointment: her exposure to two divergent cultures has alienated her from both of those cultures, becoming “practically a foreigner in her own country” (Rizzuto, 38).

Consequently, Marji and Esperanza share the same cultural alienation in spite of their different environments. They have acquired different cultural values from foreign settings and situations that are North American in Esperanza’s case and European in Marji’s. However, they are unable to assimilate into the foreign culture, for their cultural integrity still remains part of themselves. This phenomenon has been described by researcher Roszak, addressing it as “ethnocultural hybridity”: their “transition from one culture to another allows the protagonist to develop central elements of (their) identity” (70). Hence, in the end, both Esperanza and Marji will strive for “reconciliation” of their native and foreign culture by “seeking to honor their original communities while still developing in new directions” (71).

Esperanza, at the end of *The House on Mango Street*, realizes that she will always be tied to her community regardless of her successful fleeing. She promises “to come back” (Cisneros, 110) if she managed to escape, in order to help “the ones that cannot

leave as easily as (her)” (105), “for the ones (she) left behind” (110); those women that since her grandmother’s times “looked out the window (their) whole life” (11). However, this will not function as boundary for her initial aim of abandoning Mango Street and becoming a writer, as she confesses in “one day I will say goodbye to Mango” (110), but she further assumes that her initial purpose of never coming back was “such a selfish wish” (105). If in the beginning she abandons the community (own culture) for her individualism (foreign culture), it is not until she combines both notions that she fully matures, and the novel reaches its end.

In fact, Marji’s situation is very similar. When she comes back from Austria, she suffers a devastating depression due to her “reverse culture shock” (Rizzuto, 39). She has assimilated different values from the two cultures she has been exposed to, but does not seem to be fully integrated in either of them (Rizzuto, 39), as previously analysed. Nonetheless, she will reach Esperanza’s conclusion: a hybrid culture might be the key to freedom, identity and integrity. Consequently, Marji will try to find a job as a gymnastics teacher, catch up with her girlfriends and marry an Iranian boy; at the same time that she will openly speak about her sexual life or challenge authorities at University.

In the end, the stories differ. Esperanza has found a solution on hybridity while Marji realizes that living between two cultures will never provide her with a proper sense of identity (Rizzuto, 39). Marji will eventually realize that she will never be free inside the Iranian society, as patriarchal as Esperanza’s, but adding also political radicalism and repression to the formula. Therefore, while Esperanza has achieved a reasonable stage of assimilation at the end of that year in Mango Street, Marji’s journey to adulthood demonstrates that hybridity results in failure. Consequently, Esperanza will remain in Mango Street, dreaming on flying away; and Marji will divorce both her husband and culture (Rizzuto, 59) in order to start a new life in Paris.

3.4 Gender and Sexuality

In both the Iranian and Mexican societies portrayed in the novels, the woman should be limited to create a family and stay in domestic confinement. While Marji is punished for “unashamedly (having) sex with more than one man” (Rizzuto, 39) and openly speaking about it (Satrapi, 235, 318); Esperanza is constantly exposed to the physical and psychological violence and self-pity that women experience when trying to

escape a male-dominated space (Cisneros, 90-93). Nevertheless, none of the protagonists seem to fit inside these role models, being this the main impediment for fitting inside their respective communities. It is in fact true that both Marji and Esperanza attempt to assimilate the gender roles imposed. Marji marries against her will (Satrapi, 315) in order to show a less critical image towards society (353). In the same way, Esperanza wears high heels (Cisneros, 40) knowing that a Chicana woman's purpose should be that of sexually inciting men, as Cisneros has constantly indicated by suggesting that a woman needs hips to attract men (O'Reilly Herrera, 197) or through Marin's example (Cisneros, 26). However, they realize that her efforts will not bring the kind of profit they expected by following those gender roles. Esperanza is sexually assaulted (Cisneros, 100) instead of managing control over men for her sake, as she intended in "Beautiful & Cruel" (Cisneros, 88-89), and Marji feels so entrapped inside her marriage that decides to leave Iran forever (Satrapi, 344).

In this way, gender issues are the main reason for Esperanza to stay in Mango Street. As aforementioned, she will assume responsibility over those women that, like her, are left alone, unprotected from the patriarchal society that encourages male domination and justifies sexual assault. In fact, this statement can be proved through Tito's mother attitude: when Esperanza informs her about his son attempting to sexually assault Sally, she would show her resignation by uttering: "What do you want me to do, (...), call the cops?" (Cisneros, 97). Besides, Cisneros reinforces her passivity by portraying her as ironing, keeping her entrapped inside her role, instead of showing any kind of preoccupation for Sally (97). Esperanza has witnessed and protested against Sally's sexual assault, armed with bricks and sticks (97), being aware of the passivity and conformity of her society, especially women's (not even Sally wants to be saved). Esperanza's experience as a rape victim, together with her feeling of helplessness and abandonment that can be perceived when she desperately laments: "Why didn't you hear me when I called? Why didn't you tell them to leave me alone?" (Cisneros, 100), is in fact what influences her to stay and help those women that might be in her place.

Similarly, Marji experiences gender and sexual repression together with sexual assault. Nevertheless, while Esperanza's protest against gender constraints emerges from her own notion of injustice, Marji will not be fully aware of those constraints until she experiences cultural differences in Austria. In Europe, she is provided with "more liberal sexual education than the conservative values taught in Iran" (Rizzuto, 51). Therefore, in

her return to Iran, she will discuss sexuality freely and openly. She will not understand the dangerousness of such trivial conversations until her mother is warned that “women like (her) should be pushed against the wall and fucked. And then thrown in the garbage” (Satrapi, 78). Moreover, she is taught by her mother that rape can in fact be carried out by the authorities (149), which shows the stage of female violence of the Iranian country. Marji, after experiencing sexual liberation in Austria, finally assumes that her sexuality is part of her integrity, and that she would never experience dignity in a country where wearing red shoes, showing hair locks or putting make-up on are severely punished. In fact, the explanation she provides for her leaving appears unhesitatingly convincing:

If a guy kills ten women in the presence of fifteen others, no one can condemn him because in a murder case, we women, we can't even testify. He's also the one who has the right to divorce and even if he gives it to you, he nonetheless has custody of the children! I heard a religious man justify this law by saying man was the seed and woman, the earth in which the grain grew, therefore the child naturally belonged to the father! Do you realize?? I can't take it anymore. I want to leave this country! (Satrapi, 340).

Hence, if Marji initially conceives sex and its discussion as empowerment, it is her deprivation of such liberty that turns her powerless and determines her exile. This does highly contrast Esperanza's approach, who is taught that sex is a way of escaping Mango Street and thus, empowering. However, when power is taken away from her through rape, that feeling of impotence is not what reinforces her aim of fleeing, but what brings back community into consideration.

4. Findings

As the previous comparative analysis intends to demonstrate, the selected novels challenge the traditional conception of the Bildungsroman genre. The comparison and contrast of the themes (the process of formation, family, identity, culture and gender) could result in fact similar to the ones typically displayed in traditional instances. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate that, regardless of their similarity, the themes and patterns of both *The House on Mango Street* and *Persepolis* challenge typical themes and patterns of traditional Bildungsromane.

Eysturoy defines the Bildungsroman as “traditionally been defined as the somewhat autobiographical novel of formation” (8). *The House on Mango Street*, with

Esperanza as its main character and narrator, can appear similar to novels such as *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the canonical traditional Bildungsroman. Both novels, despite of the fact of being fictional, comprise autobiographical content to a high extent. *The House on Mango Street* does reflect the Chicana situation in the same manner in which Cisneros masterly mirrors society through the images of the house or the *barrio*, echoing the previously discussed “microcosm” approach. Thus, even though it can be the reflection of any Chicana living on “‘the wound’ between two cultures” (Anzaldúa, on O’Reilly Herrera, 193), it appears impossible to detach Esperanza and Mango Street from the fictional frame. Therefore, it is accurate to classify *The House on Mango Street* as traditional in terms of genre, being the characters and the content presented the disjunctive aspects to further analyse.

Considering *Persepolis* as an autobiography appears more accurate but, at the same time, inevitably controversial. In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi accounts herself her own maturational process from childhood to adulthood and, hence, the novel constitutes a clear example of autobiography and Bildungsroman. Nonetheless, a detachment from tradition appears in the medium she chooses in order to transmit her Bildung process: the graphic novel, where language and image appear interpolated. This highly innovative pattern has lead scholars such as Davis to investigate the role of the graphic novel inside the autobiographical genre, concluding that the graphic form implies a “new artistic, literary, and creative experience – a revised aesthetic” (1) when opposed to traditional Bildungsroman. Therefore, even though *Persepolis* is traditional in terms of genre, it does in fact challenge the medium or application of traditional Bildungsroman.

Despite of being featured as traditional in terms of genre, *The House on Mango Street* challenges the traditional medium of the Bildungsroman in a more significant manner. Sandra Cisneros has described the form of her novel as organized in vignettes, which are at the same time composed by “lazy poems” (Sparknotes Editors). The result is of a novel composed by small, loosely rhythmical, child-like written chapters which can be function dually: they provide the sense of realism that an autobiography would not lack and, at the same time, they offer a ground-breaking pattern for the Bildungsroman.

Dilthey, who prescribed the notions of the traditional Bildungsromane by taking *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as canonical, did strongly defend that the process of formation should be subject to values from the Enlightenment. One of those values was, as portrayed in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, that the Bildung should bear “a regular

development”, and that “each of the [maturational] stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage” (on Boes, 232).

Following this argumentative line, it is assumable that *The House on Mango Street* includes maturational progress in Esperanza’s character. In the same way that she experiences the physical changes from childhood to adolescence, she develops a maturational status that does not correspond to the one displayed at the beginning of the novel. Nonetheless, after a proper analysis had been carried out, one would conclude that *The House on Mango Street* does only present two maturational stages, focusing on the abandonment of the first stage (individualism) in order to embrace the next one (hybridism). This phenomenon can be linked to the ideas defended by McWilliams, who supported that the traditional notion of childhood-to-adulthood Bildung is obsolete, as it tends to be substituted by “chronicles of transformation in the middle age” (on Snircová, 138), as perfectly depicted in *The House on Mango Street*.

Persepolis shows a more gradual development in its protagonist. Holding to the typical organization of childhood-to-adulthood Bildung, the story is likely to be considered traditional; at least, when dealing with the process of development. Far from counterfeiting conventions, *Persepolis* demonstrates how gradual development, as understood by Dilthey, is inaccurate. Marji does not gain the maturational summit when arriving to adulthood and, thus, she lacks the sense of identity that would have been prove of full maturation in instances of eighteenth century Bildungsromane. Marji is metaphorically obstructed in the Bildung process, proving its complexity when linked to particular circumstances (war, emigration, patriarchy) and, hence, highlighting the lack of verisimilitude of that gradual, almost scientific Bildung.

Moreover, the concluding stage towards maturation in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* can be considered the traditional ending of coming-of-age narratives: the Bildung would lead the subject to fit in society (Gallego, 64). While *The House on Mango Street* might result similar to the canonical model, *Persepolis* clearly defeats the traditional notions of the character and its ending. Esperanza, through cultural hybridity, assimilates her cultural background. Even though this ending can appear in communion with traditional ones, Esperanza’s story shows that fitting in her society will only be conceivable through hybridity. Hence, she will have to assimilate different values from different societies in order to fit in one of them. However, *Persepolis* proves that not even hybridity is a solution when Marji fails assimilating her society, once she has tried that

way of living. Her decision of fleeing her homeland does not only demonstrate the uncertainty of a proper stage of maturity, but also that the Bildung might not follow time constraints and can be continued through adulthood.

In addition, it is of high importance to remark the importance of culture and its role in both of the novels. In fact, the protagonists' approach to their own and foreign cultures are a pivotal issue and main determiner in their Bildung, something that defeats those traditional Bildungsromane where only a man could experience a journey that would acknowledge his cultural and self-identity. These ideas can be contrasted with Dilthey's nationalist approaches, which defended that the Bildungsroman must be "a product of sociological circumstances that obtained only in the German principalities" (Boes, 232). The inclusion of the post-colonial point of view inside the Bildungsroman, studied by scholars such Jussawalla (23-38), can be appreciated in both of the novels, causing the definitive death of the traditional nationalist line of thought.

Addressing family issues on traditional Bildungsromane would not result out of place. Family rupture is in fact a subject appearing in traditional Bildungsromane such as *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, but has also evolved and adjusted to different literary periods, encompassing novels such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or *The Catcher in the Rye*. With these productions as reference, the typical attitude of the protagonist would be that of refuting its role models, as also shown in *The House on Mango Street*, were it functions as a representation of Esperanza's society. However, the challenge for family as a theme inside the Bildungsroman tradition comes when Marji finds support in her family. They will highly condition her Bildung, encouraging her to stick to her integrity and backing her on not fitting in the Iranian society, avoiding that discussed "traditional ending". Marji, in the same way, finds mentorship inside her family members, being her uncle and grandmother the most influential for her process of maturation. This situation appears unprecedented in traditional Bildungsromane, where mentorship is usual but does never originate inside the family realm. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the protagonist decides to detach himself from his family and, as Sumalla points out, her mother will help him doing so (4). Being this situation similar to the one in *Persepolis*, where Marji decides to scape her home and leave her family behind, not without their consent, there is an important difference between them: the protagonist that flees his family is now the adult Marji. She is a woman that has not only escaped a society in which she does not fit in (as Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*),

but has also run away from the political repression and gender expectations of the Iranian society.

Even though some traditional Bildungsromane have implicitly presented some patriarchal societies, either real or fictional, there is no instance of a non-European or non-American patriarchal society in eighteenth century Bildungsroman. In contemporary Bildungsromane like *Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street*, extremely repressive and patriarchal societies are actually depicted. Both the Iranian and the Chicano society impose strict gender roles inside their communities, being the assimilation of those the main requirement for fitting in Esperanza's and Marji's respective societies. The challenge for this traditional approach comes when both protagonist do not focus as much on rejecting or vindicating their social roles (in fact, Esperanza chooses to embrace that role by helping her community). As Labovitz explains, this is a traditional attitude that would have been applied to the traditionally male Bildungsroman. Instead, she claims that this behaviour has been modified in women who, as Esperanza and Marji, rather "struggle for 'equality between sexes'" (on Snircová, 137).

Moreover, the fact that both Marji and Esperanza are female main protagonists, appearing in female written Bildungsromane, needs to be highlighted and considered as the most relevant divergence from traditional coming-of-age narratives. Taking distance from eighteenth century tradition, some other models can be also analysed. *The Mill on the Floss*, whose case has been previously analysed, does not only leave aside the Bildung of the female character, but is also written by a male author. This demonstrates that, even though female's conditions, resources and status have been inevitably changing and adjusting themselves to new socio-historical context, the Bildungsromane did still not focus on the female character and her Bildung. Setting the focus on more updated productions such as *A Room of One's Own*, more similarities with *The House on Mango Street* and *Persepolis* begin to emerge, regardless of their belonging to different genres. In Woolf's essay, a woman tells a story about a woman and womanhood, mentioning also the differences between male and female situations and the masculine perception of women, setting the path to the plots by Cisneros and Satrapi.

Despite of addressing gender differences and issues as a traditional Bildungsroman would have never done before; *Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street* stand out due to their approach to sexuality. Both sexual liberty and assault are two of the most relevant aspects in the novel, depicting the women protagonist as mature adult

women through sexuality. Being sexual initiation one of the themes included in some traditional Bildungsromane, the intercourse tends to be consented and centred in the male protagonist. However, the perspective of both the selected novels differ from that premise. On one hand, Esperanza transmits her experience as a rape victim from her point of view, giving voice to a female who accounts sexual “intercourse”. In this way, *The House on Mango Street* challenges the traditional pattern of the man retelling his sexual experience, consented or through rape, but never in the shoes of the female experiencer. On the other hand, Marji defeats the same premise and does even go further, by showing how sex and sexual discussion provide her with an empowerment that would have been unconceivable in the eighteenth century Bildungsroman.

5. Conclusion

This essay has analysed the divergences and similitudes from traditional Bildungsromane that contemporary female coming-of-age narratives might suppose. Bearing into account the history of the Bildungsroman, the ruling tendencies of the genre have been deeply studied, in order to broaden the scope of its conception. Some of the most canonical Bildungsroman productions have been employed in order to provide a historic and literary context that would be suitable for the understanding of some of the most updated versions of the Bildungsroman: *Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street*.

A comparative analysis of both of the novels has been carried out, demonstrating their value as innovative female Bildungsroman. Therefore, the last section is devoted to clarifying the manners in which *Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street*, as representatives of that innovative contemporary female Bildungsroman, coincide or disagree with traditional notions and models inside the genre of the novel of formation. The differences in characters, accounted experiences and the use of poetry and graphic novel comprise the most relevant divergences, proving some of the traditional notions as obsolete. However, the novels do also mimic traditional themes such as family rupture, assimilation of society and self-formation. Nonetheless, the point of view from which this aspects are portrayed (a female character from a female author) would never correspond to conventionalities. Hence, it is my assumption that *Persepolis* and *The House on Mango Street* attempt to modify all the previous Bildungsromane by, finally, addressing the female Bildung with the importance and detail it deserves.

My concluding remarks are centred in an aspect that I find of crucial importance. I would like to acknowledge that despite of the irrefutable logic about the literary genres evolving through the passing of time, my thesis statement did focus on a comparison of the origins and the most current instances of Bildungsroman with a purpose. This choice, all in all, was motivated in order to bring into consideration how the progress of the genre has not provided women and their Bildung with the place and attention they deserve until the late twentieth century. Nevertheless, the stories of Marji and Esperanza are, without hesitation, a source of empowerment for those women that, like myself, are at the gates of adulthood and cannot find proper models of maturation inside literature and rely on their own experience in order to, finally, grow up.

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