

The Unmade Self

AN ESSAY

Saikat Majumdar

Ashoka University

ARE ALL NOVELS BILDUNGSROMANS? I remember wondering about this question several years ago, at an event organized by the Center for the Study of the Novel at Stanford. We were discussing Joseph Slaughter's probing comparative analysis of human rights theory and the novel *Human Rights, Inc.* when the question started to haunt me. I don't remember if we reached a conclusion, perhaps because no conclusion was possible, but the impulse behind the question has never left me. Why read novels if not to marvel at the way characters change and evolve, learn about life, grow or degenerate, in ways that remind us that in life, degeneration, too, is a kind of growth?

Still, there is no way to turn away from the peculiar empathy a true bildungsroman, a novel of growth from childhood to adulthood, howsoever defined, claims from its readers. Perhaps because it's a kind of aspirational change with which most of us—certainly most of us in a position to read and enjoy novels—can identify. Childhood is the otherness that was once our self. Growth is the kind of aspiration, or oppression, which we all experience. To most of us who like to read novels, including some of us who also like to write them—or things resembling their fragments, in some art form or the other—bildungsromans claim a special empathy, sometimes of a fictitious kind, of a promise of growth into an alive, sensitive relation to the world, with the possibility of creating something like it all over again.

Hence the irresistible temptation of the modernist bildungsroman, especially the autobiographical ones, which often ask to be read as *künstlerromans*, the story of the making of the artist, whether or not they are expressly so. What is more attractive than a young person trying to make their way in the world, growing, falteringly, on the way, sensitive to the nuances of one's making, much like the way a dedicated reader of novels thinks about the carving of a self through language. How does one say no to that call for empathy?

Was it natural for Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* to call out to me when I was the same age as Stephen Dedalus at the end of that novel? Perhaps. It never occurred to me

to question the vitality of Stephen's growth from the perspective of his colonial predicament, as Jed Esty would do years later in his probing book *Unseasonable Youth*. Over and above the simple reason that Esty's book wasn't around back then, what sprang to life was the impulse to celebrate a narrative of growth and make it one's own. An understanding of such a *bildung* as stalled either by modernism's experimental temporality or by colonial entanglement was not on the horizon, despite my reading of the book from turn-of-the-century Calcutta, a city in some ways like turn-of-the-century Dublin, never mind the hundred years between the two turns. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* churned a similar celebration, even though the trajectory of the *künstlerroman* was better concealed there than in Joyce's iconic story of the artist.

For an aspiring writer in the colony, modernist *bildungsromans* such as Joyce's and Lawrence's come to quickly embody an aspiration to a certain model of artistic craft. It is the model of craft deified by New Criticism, which not only elevates the post-Enlightenment, Romantic notion of the artistic self into a rarefied place but also makes it more real, almost attainable, by sharpening its formal and technical features. That the kind of fiction Lawrence goes on to write subsequently does not really subscribe to this New Critical model of perfection does not really puncture one's consciousness. Growth becomes *growth* into a distinct and identifiable artistic practice.

As the twentieth century rolled on, the place where a writerly *bildung* went to hone itself was the American Creative Writing Program. That is where I found myself, four months before the end of the twentieth century until the first couple of years of the twenty-first, living in close attention to fictional craft. True to the sound of the "workshop" that shapes its core, the American MFA reveals a hammer-and-tongs dedication to the myriad elements of craft, voice, point of view, character, and the rest. At the same time, it is impossible to miss not only a pointed lack of historical and political awareness of cultures that surround texts but also the centrality of a kind of whiteness that I wanted to describe, for want of a better phrase, as "anti-intellectual." The aspirational, highly self-conscious narrative of modernist *bildung* that I had picked up—and, in a sense, tried to embody—felt frustrated by the crisp minimalism that owed its origins to Raymond Carver and, perhaps, Ernest Hemingway. It would take me years to learn to appreciate such writing. Entering graduate school to read and write about literature, I returned to modernist effervescence, my space of comfort and, as I slowly began to realize, of a kind of indulgence. Initially intent on an interpretation of British and Irish modernism, I eventually globalized my account to include other spaces from the erstwhile British Empire. But it was an archival expansion of a literary mode that did not call for any kind of epistemic crisis. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, an expanded, inclusive account of a discourse can integrate new archives into existing ones without fundamentally altering the dominant character of the discourse—or catapulting it into a "crisis." I integrated, meaning well, causing no disruption.

The crisis came a few years later, in the form of a novel: *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*. It is the best-known novel by the celebrated Kannada novelist U. R. Ananthamurthy, translated by the poet and critic A. K. Ramanujan. My first impression of the novel was that it was badly written, erratically crafted. I did not enjoy it. Baffled by the book's classic status, I revisited it, and slowly, for the first time in my life, the ground started to shift beneath the self-making impulse that had brought together my identities as a reader and a writer—spontaneously, without me thinking too much about it. It was a jarring awakening to a whole new horizon. I looked back at the particular, indeed, narrow nature of craft I'd taken away from my own personal entanglement with the modernist *künstlerroman*. My artistic and, indeed, readerly literacy was steeped in this

singular definition of craft. I had never felt this stylistic dislocation while reading in Bangla, the language I inherited from my parents and in which I read extensively. But transported to English syntax—which invariably also seemed to bring a worldview of its own—this Kannada novel from 1965 foregrounded its unwieldiness, drawing attention back to the hidden seams of what I thought was my seamless *bildung* into the craft of fiction.

And they kept coming. Empathy with human growth and development in fiction had taught me the need to understand the motivation of a character, whether or not you agreed with that motivation. What they want must make sense to you, whether you loved or hated them. This was a lesson honed by creative writing programs too. What to do, then, with a character like Brij Mohan in the short story “Peerun,” by the Urdu writer Sadat Hasan Manto? What to make of his strange sexual diffidence and perverted love for “bad luck”? A character who seemed to resist growth and change, under the deceptive garb of seeking it? Brij Mohan was a photographer living in Bombay, rooming with the narrator, occasionally employed by the film studios but, more often than not, out of a job. His Sunday entertainment was to borrow train fare from the narrator and to go and see Peerun, a woman with whom he solved crossword puzzles, for which Peerun occasionally won small sums of money, of which Brij Mohan never claimed a share. He also took endless photos of Peerun, which revealed her as “really quite plain” to the narrator—another reason for his confusion about Brij Mohan’s love for her company, in addition to the fact that Peerun had a boyfriend, who took credit for Brij Mohan’s photographs of Peerun when they occasionally appeared in magazines, under the boyfriend’s name.

The real mystery, however, was that Peerun seemed to be the source of “bad luck” for Brij Mohan, who could never keep a job for long, a fact he spiritedly attributed to Peerun’s influence on his stars. He and Peerun fought over this, and one day, they resolved not to see each other anymore. Miraculously, a letter of appointment arrived for Brij Mohan, and he kept the job for six months, a period during which he did not see Peerun. And then he called her one day, and lo and behold, he lost his job—a fact that seemed to have a rather cheering effect on him! But in the end, the day came when he did not lose his job despite his meeting Peerun. Her spell was lifted! The story ends with a comically sad statement by Brij Mohan: “Peerun’s gone along with her bad luck. And one of my most interesting activities has come to an end. What excuse will I now have to stay out of work?”

Here is a character who seems to resist readerly empathy at every turn, frustrating the growth of such an impulse in the reader. The rhythm of his sexual inclinations is especially hard to understand—more so for a Western reader, which I realized whenever I taught this story in North America. He almost doesn’t seem to have any such inclinations, and yet there is a murmur, a rather befuddling one. And he may be a shirker when it comes to work—many artists and photographers on the fringes of the entertainment industry are—but what is this opportunistic fatalism, this cat-and-mouse game he plays with his supposedly ill-fated stars? Does he really believe in them? Or are they just an excuse, even to himself? Everything he does, and does not do, is tinged with the teasing hues of the erotic or, rather, the frustration of it. Was there ever a more maddening play of labor and sex, contrary to every imaginable human impulse?

I won’t pretend this isn’t a little bit of an exaggeration—after all, losers, wanderers, and vagrants thrive in art and literature. This is more about the importance of this story to me—my meeting with it at a moment when I was just stirring to a kind of questioning of the growth and development impulse, the appeal to tangible motivation, the adherence to principles of structure

and sympathy—everything I had personally canonized while living my own growth and aspiration as a reader and writer. But in Manto’s story, fiction becomes a narrative of unmaking, of a careless, trivial kind, where the unmaking instinct is no more reliable than the false pretense of making.

How translatable were these uniquely localized idiosyncrasies? My students’ confusion with Brij Mohan’s sexual motives gave me pause. Was it even possible to capture these alien values in an English syntax? This was a time when I was dealing with demons of my own. Would the peculiar mistrust of the figure of the actress in certain provincial communities, such as the middle-class society in Communist-ruled Calcutta in the 1980s, be capturable in such form and syntax? This question haunted me while I struggled with my novel *The Firebird*, the story of a young boy’s destructive obsession with his mother’s life as a stage actress. How would I etch the community of suspicion? The English word “neighborhood” felt inadequate to capture the space of such communities, a dense, moist, grapevine of murmuring voices and secret stares, for which I needed to use the Bangla word *para* in the English-language novel. Writing the story of a child, it was hard to escape the modernist *bildung* into a certain kind of craft, no matter how deeply thwarted this *bildung* was in this novel. How would that craft work with deeply provincial values? Could Stephen Dedalus’s provincialism become mine, *without* entering the convenient portability of the “global novel”?

But local stories happen elsewhere too. When *The Firebird* came out in the United States under the title *Play House*, I was in the Boston area, a fellow at the humanities center of a college there, working on a new book. Suddenly, the #MeToo movement ripped through the world, taking apart media, entertainment, and academia more than anything else. The chilling story of Harvey Weinstein forced the world to reckon with the way a patriarchal order had long looked at women in performance with the opportunistic mix of lust and suspicion. Provincial stories, I realized anew, were peculiarly local versions of human narratives. They resist the global, certainly the deceptive anodyne of the universal, but a certain human form trickles down with the sweat and sound of a local place. While in the Boston area I got together with Michael Rezendes, a former *Boston Globe* journalist and the leading light of the “Spotlight” team that won a Pulitzer for the investigative reporting that revealed the cover-up of the vast and powerful network of child molesters nurtured by the Catholic Church, an investigation that became the subject of the Academy Award–winning film *Spotlight*. The horror stories Michael shared came to me as I was revising the manuscript of a love story about two boys living in a boarding school run by a Hindu monastic order in late twentieth-century India, where same-sex relations were criminalized. The Catholic atmosphere of discipline-and-punish in boys’ boarding schools and the priests’ oppression of the young boys, sometimes redolent of Joyce’s *Portrait*, were very, very different from the sandalwood scent of god in a Hindu ashram, the lilt of its slokas and prayers.

Even more sternly masculinist than the Catholic Church, however, Hindu monastic boarding schools for boys often assert a celibacy that depends on the banishment of women from their precincts. They view heterosexuality as the only threat to celibacy, refusing to acknowledge any other kind. This was exactly the controversy that ripped through India a few years ago, over the question of whether menstruating women should or should not be allowed into Kerala’s Sabarimala temple, which celebrated the celibate god Ayappan, who is surrounded by male friends for whom he reserves a deep and special bond. The Hindu setting’s sights, sounds,

and smells were all unmistakably different from those of the Catholic world, and yet a fractured humanity, even an elusive divinity, trickled through both worlds.

Erich Auerbach has contrasted the externalized, sensory, digressive narration of Homer with the more obscure and abstract narration of the Bible, which is directed toward a single goal. Unlike the Homeric epics, which take delight in sensory effect and which lie and fabricate when necessary, the biblical stories lay claim to the singularity of an absolute truth. The Hindu epics—and, more importantly, the worldview behind them—resemble the Hellenic pantheon and Homeric narration far more than they resemble the biblical insistence on absolute truth. Nevertheless, with its rituals and iconography Catholicism extends a strange appeal to Hindu asceticism that makes the Hindu atmosphere half-real to existing narrative traditions in English. But only half-real.

Sometimes, translated, the messiness of Hindu fatalism articulates itself in biblical austerity. The theft packs a punch, especially at the opening of a story. Such is the opening I recently gave my fiction-writing students in India to read:

He had lost twenty rupees. After he'd looked everywhere and couldn't find them, he had his meal and went to sleep. It was afternoon.

“Twenty Rupees” is the translation of a short story by the Hindi writer Vinod Kumar Shukla. Shukla, as the translators Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Sara Rai say, is “among the few writers alive whose work has appeared in journals where world literature is published or discussed . . . but who has neither heard of these journals nor of world literature.” This five-page story, too, charts a bildung—of a young man who loses a twenty-rupee note and eventually finds it three days later, and what the money means to him. Homegrown, unaware of the world, it is a humble self-making, with small dreams. A