CHAPTER FOUR

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN FICTIONAL WORKS

The novelist does not hesitate to open secret doors before you; the novelist dares to invite you to visit the lower floors of the house and the cellars and locked places in which dust and old furniture and memories gather, and every corridor of the self where electricity is not yet installed and from where a suspicious stale smell emanates.

Ahlem Mosteghanemi

_Feminist Fiction and the Coming-of-Age Novel_

Of all the forms of fiction, the *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, is particularly suited for exploring mother-daughter relationships in women’s literature. The singular attention of the *Bildungsroman* to the protagonist’s process of self-development, shaped as it is by interaction with the social environment, renders this genre most relevant to the topic under discussion. As defined by M. H. Abrams, the traditional *Bildungsroman* portrays "the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences—and usually through a spiritual crisis—into maturity and the recognition of his or her identity and role in the world.” The family and the wider society become the site for experience, often embodying forces hostile to the protagonist’s ambitions and struggle for authentic selfhood. The protagonist’s response to influences and pressures from the environment, namely, the interplay between psychological and social factors, determines the path toward self-development. Successful *Bildung* requires adequate nurturance and “the existence of a social context that will facilitate the unfolding of inner capacities, leading the young person from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and

---

maturity.” The particular Bildung of the protagonist, its possibilities or limitations, reflects to a large extent the zeitgeist—the spirit of the time and place in question.

Since its origin in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship in late eighteenth-century Germany, the Bildungsroman has undergone significant transformations to accommodate other cultural and historical variables. Specifically, the traditional Bildungsroman was mainly concerned with male developmental patterns and goals, whereas its contemporary versions include the crucial social categories of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Despite its belated emergence in Anglo-American literature of the twentieth century, the female Bildungsroman has become a popular fictional form among women writers. Ellen Morgan points out that the upsurge of feminist activity and analysis in the 1960s led to an increase in both the production of the female Bildungsroman and feminist criticism of the genre. In her view, the female Bildungsroman has become “the most salient form for literature influenced by neo-feminism.” Similarly, Barbara White labels the modern feminist Bildungsroman “the most popular form of feminist fiction,” and Annie Eysturoy considers it “one of the most viable literary forms in women’s and minority literature.”

The popularity of the female Bildungsroman seems all the more striking given the tendency among critics of the genre to regard it as dead. As Bonnie Hoover Braendlin remarks, “Underlying the major critical studies of the Bildungsroman is the assumption that it is primarily a white male-dominated genre currently eclipsed by the preoccupation of contemporary novelists with alienated man’s loss of societal responsibilities, harmony, and socially sanctioned identity.” Put differently, in an age of information technology and global capitalism where changes in employment, lifestyle, and intimacy are increasingly rapid and disruptive, the self as a project can no longer be pursued

---

7 Eysturoy, Daughters of Self-Creation, pp. 10–11.