FEMALE LEAD CHARACTERS AS EXAMPLES OF BILDUNGSROMAN HEROINES IN L’AMOUR, LA FANTASIA BY ASSIA DJEBAR AND LES YEUX BAISSES BY TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

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ABSTRACT

BILGEN AKMAN: Female Lead Characters as examples of Bildungsroman heroines in *L’Amour, la fantasia* by Assia Djebar and *Les Yeux baissés* by Tahar Ben Jelloun
(Under the direction of Dr. Hassan Melehy)

This thesis presents two Maghrebian novels written in French that share aspects of the Bildungsroman tradition. This reading via the lens of the Bildungsroman underscores the importance of the choice of a young female central character. The novels are subjected to a close reading that focuses on the female characters as they journey towards adulthood. The first novel, Assia Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia*, chronicles the story of Djebar’s upbringing interspersed with stories depicting Algeria’s colonial history. The second novel, *Les Yeux baissés* by Tahar Ben Jelloun, focuses on a young female immigrant coming-of-age while coping with the in-betweenness created by her migration. These contemporary novels are shown to be examples of an evolved genre that utilizes elements of the Bildungsroman. Despite being part of a new novel form these French-language Maghrebian novels have adapted the symbolic nature of the traditional Bildungsroman genre.
TO THE MEMORY OF MY GRANDMOTHER AND THE
COUNTLESS WOMEN LIKE HER WHO SOUGHT KNOWLEDGE AND
EDUCATION BY ANY AND ALL MEANS AVAILABLE.
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Table of Contents

Chapters

I. INTRODUCTION.........................................................................................................................1

II. HOW THE BILDUNGSROMAN CONTRIBUTES TO CURRENT DISCOURSE ABOUT L’AMOUR, LA FANTASIA AND LES YEUX BAISÉS........................................................................................................12

III. WRITING HER-Story: Coming-of-age in Assia Djebar’s L’Amour, la fantasia .................................................................23

IV. GROWING (UP) ROOTED: Coming home in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s Les Yeux baissés.................................................................................................................................36

V. CONCLUSION..........................................................................................................................46

WORKS CITED..................................................................................................................................51
Chapter I

Introduction

The youth-focused nature of coming-of-age stories provides a window into the shifting cultures and ideologies of society. Assia Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia* and Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *Les Yeux baissés* share plots that center on a young female protagonist whose journey from childhood and adolescence to adulthood is marked by the conflicting nature of her milieu. The emergence of the Bildungsroman in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, which then spread rapidly over the next century throughout central Europe, symbolized the uncertainty of a move towards modernity (Moretti 4/5). A similar uncertainty in the direction of the postcolonial societies in North Africa and France exists, and the two novels presented here have highlighted this state of insecurity by presenting narratives that draw on the Bildungsroman structure. This comparison of Maghrebian novels written in French to the European tradition of the Bildungsroman points to an interesting relationship between the two otherwise dissimilar corpora.

Using the Bildungsroman to analyze these novels must be done with caution. First, the term is historically linked to the novel form found primarily in Europe, and it depicts the struggles of a specific era. The Bildungsroman originated in Germany;

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1 As a term, the Bildungsroman is difficult to define but Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, provides a description that presents the genre as the result of social movements that is useful in this discussion.
however, shortly after its beginnings the genre appeared in greater numbers in both the British and French novels. In crossing national borders, it evolved as a common genre in the realist movements. Furthermore, despite this ability to be modified and adapted by literatures in various countries, it is imperative that the novels here are not seen as part of an extension or subcategory of the European novel. Literature in the Maghreb has a style and tradition that are decidedly separate from the European tradition. A distinction needs to be made here that will narrow the discussion to deal only with the Maghrebian literature that is written in the French language and will avoid the danger of treating the two novels as a provincial style within French literature as is stated in the Tome Littératures Francophones: Le Maghreb (Noiray 8). This is not to be a new classification of the novels by Djebar or Ben Jelloun; rather the Bildungsroman tradition with its narrative characteristics will be considered as an additional element in the analysis of these two texts.

A review of the current criticism is needed before the analysis of the two novels can be made meaningful in a discussion of their relationship to the Bildungsroman. The second chapter of this thesis presents the scholarly discourse surrounding these novels. Hybridity in culture and language are central to both stories. The axiomatic connection of language to education or culture to formation is a basis upon which the argument can be made for the usefulness of the Bildungsroman model in this study. For the examination to

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2 Examples are the works by Victorian authors Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë and the French realist authors Stendhal and Gustave Flaubert. This is not an exhaustive list but they are among the common examples featured in Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World*. An in depth study of the structure of the Bildungsroman genre that builds on the previous work by Georg Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukács summarized the Bildungsroman as the “reconciliation of the problematic individual, guided by his lived experience of the ideal, with concrete social reality” (Lukács 132).
be complete an outline of the Bildungsroman is also presented. Emphasis is placed on the journey of the female characters living between cultures and on the added difficulties they face due to their intercultural experiences. Both narratives explore the themes of bilingualism and employ plurality in voice in order to capture the state of uncertainty as well as the displacement of identity created from the colonial inheritance of the characters.

The third and fourth chapters are close readings that highlight the precise instances where a relationship can be identified to specific structures of the Bildungsroman. As a genre that marked the beginning of modernity (Moretti 5), the novels associated with Bildungsromane at the turn of the eighteenth century are seen as reflective of the social movement of the time. By focusing on a young protagonist, one may easily draw parallels to a society in the early stages of embracing a new era (Moretti 5).

In the first respect youth is ‘chosen’ as the new epoch’s ‘specific material sign’, and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to accentuate modernity’s dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, modernity’s ‘essence’, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past (Moretti 5). The dynamism and instability that Moretti refers to are also present in our current postcolonial times. Postcolonial texts hence benefit from a youth-centered plot. Though Assia Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia* is a historical as well as autobiographical text, which also includes collected archival information about a period of time that spans

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3 The plural of Bildungsroman
over a hundred years, there still exists a sense of movement towards the future rather than
the past. This is achieved by presenting the tracing of history alongside the stories of her
progress towards adulthood. That being said, the problematic issues of the past due to a
colonial history that suffers from flagrant omissions and misrepresentations are given
notable attention in Djebbar’s novel. Again this revisiting has a forward movement; it is
repairing the past in order to seek out a more stable future. In Bildungsromane, there is no
dwelling on the past as is seen in the romantic tradition. Likewise, in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s
novel, the young protagonist is constantly looking outward; her desire to move away
from her village and the resistance she has to returning give the sense of a constant
propulsion forward.

The term “Bildungsroman” is often used interchangeably with the general
descriptive term “coming-of-age fiction”, since the Bildungsroman is the story of a
character that is indeed coming to the age of maturity; however, not all coming-of-age
stories are necessarily Bildungsromane. I find it necessary to state explicitly what the
distinction is, as there remains some controversy surrounding the term Bildungsroman;
without a single unambiguous definition, the orderly analysis of these two novels could
not proceed. Jeffrey L. Sammons, a German scholar, is one of many academics concerned
with the overuse and widespread application of the genre. For him, as noted in “The
Bildungsroman for Nonspecialists: An Attempt at a Classification”, the genre belongs
exclusively to the German novel. He states: “the Bildungsroman is a peculiarly German
form [and] it was the dominant form of the German novel in the nineteenth century, thus
isolating the genre from its counterparts in other countries” (Sammons 28). His primary
concern in addressing the genre’s appropriateness for other national literatures is to reclaim it, since how the genre is applied affects the perception of the position of German literature in the history of the novel. Likewise, regarding the argument put forth in this thesis, answering the question of the definition will affect the perception of the place the Maghrebian novel written in French holds. Hence, a definition that would show the Bildungsroman as a mode to classify the Maghrebian novel within a European context would not be useful, since it would give a false impression of the literature from the Maghreb.

In the interest of this discussion, the term Bildungsroman should be used with consideration given to its historical and ideological associations. Sammons writes: “When it comes to period and genre classifications, our difficulties multiply, for they are terms of literary history and thus become involved with the insecurities of historiography in general and are not infrequently freighted with ideology” (Sammons 26/27). If the written history is being distorted by ideology than the classification of texts that relies upon it suffers a similar fate. The writing of history thus often influences the act of classifying texts. The texts that Sammons refers to throughout his essay are placed within the context of a written history in support of the predominance of the Enlightenment age that promoted the individual pursuit of knowledge and fueled the revolutionary spirit of the time. Sammons highlights this problem in his argument to understand the limits of the applicability of the genre, however it need not be a deterrent for its use. The texts in questions need to be examined while accepting the possibility that the Bildungsroman is a genre that is, like all other classifications, tied to a historiography. The link between
historiography and ideology with literature need not limit the influence that a national literature can have in other corpora.

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin does see this genre as a part of the history of the novel without such nationalist constraints.

Some scholars guided by purely compositional principles (the concentration of the whole plot on the process of the hero’s education), significantly limit this list (Rabelais, for example, is excluded). Others, conversely, requiring only the presence of the hero’s development and emergence in the novel, considerably expand this list, including such works, for example, as Fielding’s *Tom Jones* or Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*. […] Some of the novels are essentially biographical or autobiographical, while others are not; in some of them the organizing basis is the purely pedagogical notion of man’s education, while this is not even mentioned in others; some of them are constructed on the strictly chronological plane of the main hero’s educational development and have almost no plot at all, while others, conversely, have complex adventuristic plots (Bakhtin 20).

This excerpt from Bakhtin’s work in Speech and Genres and Other Late Essays, gives a summary of the complexities of discussing a genre that is either too restrictive or too far-reaching for any meaningful applications. Despite Bakhtin’s interest in the aspect of time and space in the novel, his analysis provides a thorough examination of the structure of the different types of Bildungsroman and other types of fiction that are often seen as being more similar than they are. The examples cited show that consideration is given to works throughout Europe. The defining characteristics of the genre are left to be decided.

The purpose will ultimately be to show that there is something of value to be gained in reading these texts as part of the Bildungsroman genre. As Carol Lazzaro-Weis from the university of Missouri has put it in her article “The Female Bildungsroman: Calling It Into Question”, genre studies are seen, as “outmoded humanist method of criticism” (Lazzaro-Weis 19). She does nonetheless consider the Bildungsroman should
be perhaps an exception to this view. Her focus is on how this genre can be used as “a useful, analytical tool for feminist critics and writers of personal stories” (Lazzaro-Weis 19). She goes on to argue that the term can rightly be used in exploring feminist texts; however, there is no distinctive form on the female Bildungsroman that has emerged as a recognizable genre. Feminist writers continue to manipulate the constructs found within the tradition of the Bildungsroman in order to create a narrative form that explores “questions surrounding the relationship between experience, subjectivity, and social structures” (Lazarro-Weis 19). Her conclusions are useful in that they open up the possibility that the need to trace personal histories through narratives and explore issues of identity within social constraints, as found in the two texts in question here, can be part of an ongoing movement. By simply raising the question about how these novels can fit into this genre, the texts begin to reveal elements that might otherwise be missed. That they at least share some of the motivations of the original Bildungsromane does underscore both their place and contribution to the ongoing history of the novel. Lazzaro-Weis notes:

To be sure, the originators of the Bildungsroman were interested in problems of representation, the relationship of the individual to the group, and questions of subjectivity, which they saw in social as well as aesthetic terms (21)

With these criteria in mind, the points of comparison become quite obvious. Whether or not there is an actual genre that might be called the female Bildungsroman or the Maghrebian female Bildungsroman is not important. What is important is that the juxtaposition of these texts to the Bildungsroman tradition highlights the use of the personal story to impress upon the reader a greater social problematic. The context of
these novels does indeed share common ground with the Bildungsroman and the close readings will demonstrate this.

In the first book *L’Amour, la fantasia* the fragmented form of the novel creates difficulties in classification. It is a combination of narratives that unites historical data, archives, anecdotes and transcribed interviews of eyewitness accounts. Adding another layer may seem to confuse the reader further, but I think that drawing out the elements that point to the narrator’s journey to adulthood as she reviews, writes and “rights” history provides more clarity to the effort. The third chapter will show how this is achieved. Immediately following the Djebar chapter is the close reading of Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *Les Yeux baissés*. Differing from Djebar’s work, this second novel is a work of fiction that does not demonstrate a hybridity of form.\(^4\) It was important to find a novel that takes a rather linear path towards adulthood in the second example in order to make clear that the style was not as important as the content. This is not to say that *Les Yeux baissés* does not have the fantastical elements that texts by Ben Jelloun have become known for, though the extent of it is comparatively less than in his other work. At the end of the fourth chapter it will be obvious that the content of both novels is representative of a coming-of-age story, which is symbolic of the uncertainty associated with the postcolonial future.

The focus of the analysis is on the female characters. This is due in part to the style of the novels in the Bildungsroman tradition. They tend to use the first person in the

\(^4\) Djebar’s novel is probably a mix of fiction and nonfiction, but the degree of the mix is left purposely unclear.
narrative which focuses on the personal experience. Though the influence of the authors’ experiences is unavoidable, especially in the case of Assia Djebar and her autobiographical novel. Here, Djebar, tells her story via a narrator that is the representation of a young Djebar growing up. In the book *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* Assia Djebar writes about the experience of writing an autobiography, which she considers *L’Amour, la fantasia* to be. She is reflective on what the process of creating an autobiography has meant for her and how the reception of her novel has an effect on her and the story itself (108-110). The process is different from fiction yet she writes that she begins both in the same way. She begins by writing the first sentence (115). Essentially the words on the page are the driving force. Djebar herself does not reread her texts because to do so conjures memories of the difficult ordeal of writing about oneself (110-115). She divulges intimate details of herself however; her text remains representation and is not a tool to be used to dissect the author. 5 Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis the young narrator will be treated as the representation of Djebar and not as Djebar herself. This will also serve to facilitate the comparison to the fictional character Fathma in Ben Jelloun’s novel, who, one could argue, is also a representation of Ben Jelloun. In the history of the genre, many of the *Bildungsromanhelden*6 were autobiographical in nature.7 When considering the classification of novels as being part of the Bildungsroman genre, there is often little attention given to the author, since the genre

5 Djebar writes in *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* that she once refused to attend a dissertation defense about one of her autobiographical novels since it would feel like attending one’s own autopsy.

6 Bildungsroman heroes

7 Examples of this are Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, and even Goethe’s prototypical *Bildungsromanheld* Wilhelm Meister.
is concerned with the elements, the journey, and the milestones of their maturation.

Making the female subjectivity the central point of the discussion will also create a basis for comparison that is less cumbersome.

Historically the genre primarily featured male protagonists and, apart from a few instances, found mostly in England, excluded women. In critical writings on the Bildungsroman genre in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond, female heroines are included in the discourse and their inclusion suggests that growing acceptance of the female in the Bildungsroman. James Hardin editor of *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* notes in the introduction that Wilhelm Dilthey, the person who takes credit for popularizing the term, did not think that the genre existed past a certain era. He sees it as a historical phenomenon whose time had passed (xiv). It may thus be argued that the term itself should be viewed as undergoing a rite of passage. Its best contemporary proponents are deeply involved with the issues central to the Bildungsroman genre. I would also argue that the Bildungsroman is appealing across cultures because writers concerned with issues of identity observed within their communities eagerly embrace the universality of the genre. Displaced within their communities and without the tools to identify the once–familiar landmarks of their original culture, these writers gravitate to the form found in the Bildungsroman since it parallels the search for identity. The female is then an immediately obvious choice for the *Bildungsromanheld* (Bildungsroman hero), as the analysis will show in both novels. Their journey is simply enriched by their female subjectivity; their navigation in the foreign spaces they encounter is perhaps more challenging, though it is a common theme in
female Maghrebian literature (Orlando 33). In *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls*, Valérie Orlando writes:

> Being in two, divided by two languages, two cultures, and/or two continents characterize the environments of the heroines [...] This space of duality, this space of disjunction – étrangeté- is so often experienced by women authors writing from the francophone Diaspora. As the authors, the heroines are exiled from their countries of origin and isolated because of their difference and their incessant search of liberty (Orlando 33).

That this excerpt has included the author in the analysis highlights the existence of a duality in the text that the characters in both Djebar’s and Ben Jelloun’s novel encounter. The in-betweenness that surrounds the characters and duality that it suggests are common issues in the Maghrebian novel and it is considered here as to how this is related to the characters’ coming-of-age. Coping with these dualities – French/Arabic, French/Berber, male/female, east /west, young/old – are part of the challenges that the young heroines face as they come-of-age. Orlando also writes that “[t]hese women are caught in the in-between, a third space that is both liberating and frightening” and therein may lie their appeal.

The applicability and relevance of the Bildungsroman as a generic classification tool that aids in critical analysis of Maghrebian literature written in French is the main purpose of the thesis. The Bildungsroman presents a means to highlight the coming-of-age experience of the female characters in both novels. Assia Djebar’s narrator in *L’Amour, la fantasia* and Tahar Ben Jelloun’s narrator in *Les Yeux baissés*, share a multitude of common concerns with the characters in the oeuvres of the original Bildungsroman works, despite the obvious differences of gender, time and space that separate them.
Chapter II

How the Bildungsroman contributes to current discourse about *L’amour, la fantasia* and *Les Yeux baissés*

As indicated in the introduction, the use of the Bildungsroman rubric in analyzing Maghrebian novels written in French is problematic for various reasons. The applicability is nonetheless useful in gaining greater insight into the novels and can be done while avoiding the usual pitfalls of genre study. First it is important to use the Bildungsroman as a rubric for analysis without classifying the novels in a limiting manner. The term is to be used as an added layer alongside other more common terminology in the analysis of the Maghrebian novel such as pluralingualism, orality, interculturality and alterity.¹ These terms represent issues in the modern Maghrebian novel, issues that lend themselves to the structure of the Bildungsroman as they are concerned with the quest for identity within a changing society. Djebar and Ben Jelloun have chosen with these two stories to use the novel form in relaying these tales and the form, though distinctly Francophone and particularly Maghrebian, has incorporated elements from the Bildungsroman either by a deliberate choice or an unconscious phenomenon. The following chapter will reveal that this is the case regardless of intent and so first requires further investigation of the genre and how these novels benefit from the juxtaposition to the Bildungsroman tradition.

¹ For a better look at the use of these terms in the study of Maghrebian and francophone texts see Valérie Orlando’s *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls*, Abdelkebir Khatibi’s *Maghreb pluriel*, and Lise Gauvin’s *La Fabrique de la langue*. 
The rise in popularity of the novel coincides with the beginnings of the Bildungsroman genre in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. “Literature, especially the novel, offers the complexity of form necessary to shaping individual growth. The desire to translate these interrelationships into a coherent narrative has produced a distinctive genre” (Abel et. al. 4), this quote shows that the novel and Bildungsroman perhaps share a symbiotic relationship. This reinforces the close relationship of the novel form to this genre and its variation for corpora from a multitude of origins can be imagined. Furthermore, this genre is seen as the result of the progression of the novel form as noted again by Bakhtin:

Classification according to how the image of the main hero is constructed: the travel novel, the novel of ordeal, the biographical (autobiographical) novel, the Bildungsroman. No specific historical subcategory upholds any given principle in pure form; rather, each is characterized by the prevalence of one or another principal for formulating the figure of the hero. Since all elements are mutually determined, the principle for formulating the hero figure is related to the particular type of plot, to the particular conception of the world, and to a particular composition of a given novel (Bakhtin 10).

At the forefront of the genre is the journey of the hero and how the hero is shaped throughout the story. It is the story of the protagonist on the way to becoming a hero (Bakhtin 21). This is important, as it makes clear that there will be an internal growth and a transformation of the character that must occur. It is not enough to attain skills as would be implied if these were simply stories about education, but the heroines in both novels show a change that leads to their maturity by the end of the book. In Nomadic Voices of Exile Valérie Orlando reviews the importance of the theme of “becoming” in Maghrebian literature. Once again focusing on the motivation of the writer, she writes:

These authors, as we have seen, exist on the anomalous fringes – on the outside of
the established norm. It is this outside, however, which is the promoter of all becoming, the centering force of a new identity for all those who have been marginalized (153).

As this “becoming” is a motivating factor in the sequence of events, the coming-of-age story provides a convenient framework in which to demonstrate this process. The classification of the novels in the Bildungsroman does not preclude them from following in this theme of creating new identities by becoming. It provides simply a means of showcasing this tendency in the narratives.

By comparing the Maghrebian literature to the Bildungsroman the similarity in the themes and motivations becomes evident. Novels from the Maghreb lend themselves to the coming-of-age story. A Maghrebian text that explores plurality of voice and issues of identity is compatible with the Bildungsroman genre. There are other types of novels that are often combined in the Bildungsroman such as the travelogues, biographies and novels of adventure that demonstrate the applicability of the genre beyond a single form or tradition. It can now be summarized that the Bildungsroman hero takes a journey to self-determination and experiences a change that manifests in the hero himself. This at the very least lays a foundation for narratives that will be considered.

Previously it was briefly mentioned that a distinction must be made between novels that merely present the education of a young person versus their formation into an evolved mature self. The word Bildungsroman is composed of the German word Bildung meaning formation, and Roman meaning, novel. However, the formation in question is more complex in the German lexicon than elsewhere, as it is historically significant. In his book *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*, Todd Kontje
discusses the significance of *Bildung* in a German context. The formation of an individual takes into account his or her education and the development of skills. A person who has gone through a *Bildung* must necessarily have acquired a set of skills (11). Johann Carl Simon Morgenstern, a professor at the University of Tartu, believed to be the first to identify the Bildungsroman as a specific group of German novels that focused primarily on the education of a young male protagonist, had a very particular kind of *Bildung* in mind when coining the term (Markner 1). The *Bildung* tradition refers to the period when a Christian, through an act of God, is transformed in order to reach his or her potential. Due to “original sin”, Christians were seen as deformed (*entbildet*), meaning fallen; the Christian, considered passive in his or her initial formation, first had to be *entbildet* (destroyed) before God could actively reform them. Hence, Christians need rehabilitation by an act of God (Kontje 1). Kontje suggests that Goethe, Schiller and Humboldt\(^2\) brought into question this involvement in one’s own inner growth (Kontje 2). These writers believed that *Bildung* was achieved through one’s interaction with one’s environment — hence it was organically achieved. Influenced by Herder and his theories on the *Bildung* as “the development of innate genetic potential under the influence of a particular geographical and cultural setting” (Kontje 2), the three Weimar Classicists wrote novels that presented a protagonist that was more active in his destiny (Kontje 3), simply put: no longer waiting patiently for intercession by God. Their heroes gained their *Bildung* through a lay struggle for enlightenment. It may be claimed that in the earlier texts, the premise was: faith in God leading to the greatest spiritual freedom. In the latter

\(^2\) Kontje refers to these authors as the three Weimar classicists
texts the premise has mutated into: great faith in oneself leads to the greatest personal freedom.

The Bildungsroman is therefore the most appropriate genre in the coming-of-age novels to compare to the Maghrebian literature since there is an implied connection between the individual, the environment and destination. Djebar’s and Ben Jelloun’s young Maghrebian female characters are the products of their environment. Orlando writes in *Nomadic Voices* about a third space that is influential in the structure of the novel (153/154). This third space is where, devoid of inequalities and hierarchies, the “Other has the possibility of free exchange” (154). To better understand how this third space is built, Orlando gives a description of its evolution. The author is free to “open a dialogue with what [Orlando calls] the First Space – that is, the old colonial world of Western stereotypes. Such a non-hierarchical space allows the author to then mediate a second space. This Second Space represents a modernized version of the “Westernized Other,” which has always been the product of a prefabricated stereotype dating back to the colonial era. […] It is also a space in which Western postcolonial rhetoric takes shape, allowing the West to mark the Other as different” (154). The Third Space hence creates a space that is beyond such stereotypes and labels that confine the formation of Maghrebian women allowing for the room to be formed “outside of the fixed ideals, away from affiliations” (155). The Maghrebian protagonist will use her in-between state to create this Third Space. For the German *Bildungsromanhelden* this freedom was accessible through the journey away from home; but for the narrator in *L’Amour, la fantasia* or Fathma in *Les Yeux baissés*, she will locate this Space in a plane that exists
between her home or place of origin and her place of exile. The outer conflict is a prominent theme in the Bildungsroman and the effects of this Third Space will be an important element to the plot. It will also serve as a way to reflect the secondary part of the narrative, that is, the social aspect of the plot.

Further to this issue of location, which plays a role in the kind of influence that the outer world has on the hero, the Bildungsroman is just as concerned with the inner conflict of the young person coming-of-age. In the *Theory of the Novel* Lukács provides an analysis of the hero in the prototypical Bildungsroman: Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*.

This is why Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister* steers a middle course between abstract idealism, which concentrates on pure action, and Romanticism, which interiorises action and reduces it to contemplation. Humanism, the fundamental attitude of this type of work, demands a balance between activity and contemplation, between wanting to mould the world and being purely receptive towards it. This form has been called the ‘novel of education’—rightly, because its action has to be a conscious, controlled process aimed at a certain goal: the development of qualities in men which would never blossom without the active intervention of other men and circumstances; whilst the goal thus attained is in itself formative and encouraging to others— is itself a means of education (Lukács 135).

The contemplative nature of the *Bildungsromanheld* is seen as being nonetheless active as it is part of what will complete his formation. In *Les Yeux baissés* the young Fathma spends a lot of time in contemplation, both before her departure and after. Her head becomes so muddled with her identity that she risks her mental health. A state of mental illness ensues and is only prevented from being her downfall with the help of a teacher. For the narrator in *L’Amour, la fantasia*, her instruction is from the multiple voices she inhabits; thus her internal conflict is resolved through shared contemplations. The balance of action and contemplation is an essential step in going from apprentice to master —
hence the symbolic nature of Wilhelm’s name that is a constant reminder that what is on
the surface is not complete without the inner mastery. His family name after all means
master, while he himself, despite the name, is yet an apprentice. The importance of
education as highlighted by Lukács is gained though the assistance of others and the
intervention of role models can be traced in Djebar and Ben Jelloun’s novels.

Both novels prominently feature education, in particular as it pertains to language
acquisition. This is seen as an important part of shaping one’s identity within the
community. In both of the novels the road to achieving education for the female is
presented as somewhat inhibited or completely hindered. This is not an uncommon
feature of the Maghrebian novel featuring female protagonists. In Evelyne Accad’s article
“Assia Djebar’s Contribution to Arab Women’s Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision,”
the theme of education is part of the greater theme of rebellion.

The pattern is brutally simple in most parts of North Africa and the Middle East:
women are born to fill the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, to be successively
subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons. Education for women is in most
cases regarded as superfluous, few occupations outside the home are open to
women, and in most cases the legal status of women is determined by the shari’a
or Muslim religious code. (802)

For a genre that depends on the education of the protagonist for its arc, it is clearly
difficult to imagine how novels about a young female protagonist that is part of such a
milieu would be able to fulfill this part of the narrative. In both cases, the heroines do
receive a formal education; however, this is always achieved in spite of their community
of origin. In Les Yeux baissés the heroine must leave her village and go to France to gain
the access needed to education. In the case of the novel by Djebar, the education she
receives is in direct opposition of the norm, and eventually, she does leave as well.
The completion of an education is the ultimate point of this type of novel.

“Originating in the Idealist tradition of the Enlightenment, with its belief in human perfectibility and historical progress, this understanding of human growth assumes the possibility of individual achievement and social integration” (Abel et. al. 5). The final goal is then to take one’s place within society; however, the female place in society historically presents its own unique set of issues: “For a woman, social options are often so narrow that they preclude explorations of her milieu” (Abel et. al. 7). The education of the *Bildungsromanheld* leads to, metaphorically speaking, the spreading of the individual’s wings and his ability to accomplish some basic goals set out by society. The Bildungsroman is hence the story of a young person rising from apprentice to master, thereby becoming a contributing member of society. In eighteenth-century Europe and elsewhere the female ascension to adulthood does not include this type of fulfillment. “Her object is not to learn how to take care of herself, but to be protected often in return for taking care of others” (Abel et. al. 8). There are a great number of stories in the female Bildungsromane traditions that take a more somber tone than the traditionally optimistic male version. “[T]he deaths in which these fictions so often culminate represent less developmental failures than refusals to accept an adulthood that denies profound convictions and desires” (Abel et. al. 11). Because of this, it can easily be argued that the struggle for the female within society results in a more rebellious or suffering protagonist.

Neither Ben Jelloun nor Djebar, however, create a narrative of the female protagonist with a tortured image. In Djebar’s novel, the struggles and pains of the
narrator’s journey to adulthood have different challenges than that of her male counterpart. The strength found within the narrator and the other females presented displays a positive image. The way in which Djebar achieves this is to be presented in a later chapter. This approach distances her narrative from the female image, which exists within the genre of the female Bildungsroman tradition, found in eighteenth century English novels such as they are described in Lorna Ellis’ book, *Appearing to Diminish*. In her book Ellis sets out to prove that a positive role model and female image existed (Ellis 205). The need for a text to deny this negative image is indicative of the fact that it was such a prevalent belief. Prior to Ellis, common discourse indicated that the female Bildungsroman might be the coming-of-age story in reverse: that is, the growth of the heroine is so restrained and stunted that it creates a downward movement. Gender need not affect the growth of the heroine in the Bildungsroman. Ascribing the Maghrebian novels to the Bildungsroman tradition does not in and of itself create a negative the image of the female.

The selected texts are just two representations and should not be considered exceptions; rather, they could be part of a larger group of stories from the Maghreb. The story of a young woman, navigating two opposing worlds as she comes of age, is a theme common elsewhere in francophone literature. The selections should be seen as a point of departure and not a comprehensive list. The focus upon the state of *Entre-deux* as a mindset was recently explored in 2006, at the NEMLA (Northeast Modern Language Association) annual conference in Philadelphia. A panel chaired by Professor Debra Popkin focused on the topic of Francophone Female coming-of-age accounts in literature.
The list of authors considered spanned four continents. The subjects covered were varied, but the overriding theme was that of self-definition and self-actualization via the young protagonist’s quest (Popkin et al. 1). What is unique to the women’s stories in the francophone novels as opposed to other Bildungsromane is that they are navigating their ascension into society and adulthood from the margins while making an effort to exist simultaneously within two cultures. This interculturality and its inherent paradox do not remove the desire to try to achieve a satisfactory ascension to adulthood and may, in fact, exacerbate and validate it. This thesis has taken the work presented at the conference further by examining what specifically is driving the novels of the Maghreb when using the Bildungsroman structure in the narrative. The elements of bilingualism, interculturality, and hybridity that are worked into the accounts of the various milestones are of particular interest.

Using the unstable hero of the Bildungsroman as our starting point, we will look at the change that would represent a heroine not yet fully formed in the beginning and who is in the process of “becoming.” This growth is sought through the exertion of the heroine’s freedom, illustrated by the heroine leaving home or familiar surroundings in order to achieve Bildung while observing the unique set of circumstances that are present within this genre for the female Bildungsromanheld.

The following chapters will take each novel and highlight the connection to the Bildungsroman tradition and what this connection can reveal. The characters will emerge from the close readings as representatives of Bildungsroman heroines. This will show the impact of the form on the protagonist’s identity and that of the society that surrounds
them. As Lukács points out, “The structure of the characters and destinies in *Wilhelm Meister* determines the structure of the social world around them” (137). This connection to society is at the heart of why these novels could be considered as part of a contemporary Bildungsroman form. The society, past and present, in Djebar’s and Ben Jelloun’s respective novels has a direct influence on the trajectory of the characters’ journeys, while their journey is also representational of a society in flux. The surrounding society is practically a supporting character in the plot. This reading of the novels with a comparison to the Bildungsroman tradition is not intended as a replacement for other readings. The importance of the use of voice, style of narrative and the aesthetics of found in the Maghrebian novel written in French must remain a part of the analysis of the novels. The comparison is meant to show the links to ongoing traditions outside francophone literature.
Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* is a fragmented story that unites fiction with historical documentation. The classification of this novel has been problematic, as it is made up of seemingly unrelated parts. Upon closer observation, the parts appear more cohesive due to their supportive role in uncovering the history of a people. The Bildungsroman structure provides a framework that promotes a reading of the novel that underscores the issues of identity that the narrator struggles with throughout her story. Djebar rewrites Algerian history in an effort to repair the loss of identity. A convenient means to achieve this is by foregrounding the young heroine's journey to adulthood.

There is a plurality of stories being revealed and this is reflective of the many voices and people whose stories have gone untold for too long. The effect is that the identity of the people of Algeria has been manipulated by an image that they have not controlled. Hence the structure of *L'Amour, la fantasia* provides a way to link the history of Algeria to the individual experience of self-discovery. Anecdotes of Djebar's childhood that alternate with stories of the invasion, occupation and liberation of Algeria create a unified narrative. The historical coverage that has been pooled together by various sources shows the impact of the colonial heritage on an individual scale. Uncovering these multiple pasts and histories forms Djebar’s story of being a young
woman in colonial Algeria. The result is a narrative that both builds and rebuilds first the identity of one woman, then of other women and finally all of Algeria.

The vital part of the novel’s appeal and success is in its structure with jarring jumps taken from chapter to chapter. However this seemingly disconnected approach is deliberately structured to link the stories. The first part begins with an anecdote from the narrator’s childhood, and like a prelude to an orchestral piece it is a snapshot of the whole narrative to come. A prominent memory is evoked that addresses some common signposts of the female Bildungsroman such as education, the inheritance of knowledge through the father, and forbidden love. Here the protagonist begins her journey as a yet unformed heroine.

*L'Amour, la fantasia* is at once a collaged autobiography and a nonlinear collection of memoirs of others. The book uses a single medium, the written word, with multimedia effects as the undertone and at times feels like a newsreel, with cinematic possibilities. The final section is a transcription from the interviews conducted by Djebar of the tribe’s women. This is the final destination, as it is the culmination of her self-discovery. The journey to uncover her identity has led to the uncovering of the soul of the nation. The novel becomes an extension of the intimate portrait of the pains of a young woman and a nation. Based on Bakhtin’s findings, the autobiography and historical novel are closely related to the Bildungsroman; however, there are major distinctions.

“Although the hero’s life course is indeed depicted, his image in a purely biographical novel lacks any true process of becoming or development. The hero’s life and fate change, they assume structure and evolve, but the hero himself remains essentially
unchanged” (Bakhtin 17). The narrator in Djebar’s novel, is changed by her experiences and by splicing the story with stories from the battlefront it is obvious that the country is also irreversibly changed. The once disparate forms of narrative seem more homogeneous as a result of the converging experiences.

In her review of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Esther Labovitz writes: “In memoirs, as in the *Bildungsroman*, a more mature, and perhaps wiser, narrator looks back upon the younger, developing protagonist and the ironic juxtaposition of the double vision serves to create a distance between the two” (Labovitz 73). When Djebar looks back, not only is she more mature, but one suspects that her look back from the vantage point of being in France, having spent time in the land of the occupier, gives her an added perspective that goes beyond just a double vision. This added perspective not only informs the content of her narrative but it may explain the use of a form that is traditionally Western. It can be expected that her intercultural education has exposed her to several novel forms that can make their way into her narratives. The plurality is seen in form and then in context as there are two stories being told within the same pages of one book. Her story parallels Algeria’s. The invasion of Algeria on June 13, 1830, by the French army, that pre-dates her existence is nonetheless tied to her beginnings and must be presented simultaneously, since she sees her self as part of the collective.

The impact of this rupture in history is entrenched in her stories. This is symbolized by the use of repeated words in the first part of the novel, in both the anecdotal chapters and in the documentary chapters. The first chapter, entitled “Fillette
arabe allant pour la première fois à l’école” ends with, “Ma fillette me tenant la main, je suis partie à l’aube” (13). This sentence is then followed by the chapter labeled roman numeral “I”, “Aube de ce 13 juin 1830, à l’instant précis et bref où le jour éclate audessus de la conque profonde” (14). Repeating the word “aube” provides a link to two chapters that would otherwise seem unrelated. The choice of word is not arbitrary and provides another bond. The word “l’aube/dawn” indicates the start of a new day. The use of a cliché at the start of a journey or adventure is apparent and it locates the anecdotal story and the account of the invasion, two stories otherwise separated by over 100 years, on the same page.

The trauma of the events described in both the first chapters heralds the start of a long journey, which is to be expected from a Bildungsroman and is not to be confused with what Bakhtin calls an adventure novel. This beginning also indicates that the protagonist will overcome the effects of the trauma along the way. The first traumatic event takes place in the first chapter. It follows a happy memory of a father that takes the daughter to school, the institutionalized place of learning. The father guiding his daughter to school under the watchful eye of the villagers is also leading his daughter away from her milieu.

Villes ou villages aux ruelles blanches, aux maisons aveugles. Dès le premier jour où une fillette "sort" pour apprendre l’alphabet, les voisins prennent le regard matois de ce qui s’apitoient, dix ou quinze ans à l’avance : sur le père audacieux et le frère inconstent (11).

This is a beginning that not only indicates a heroine in the process of becoming but also shows a young female character seeking out her growth as she takes a journey away from the familiar. Her act is guided by the father but is nonetheless a rebel act. Her education is
seen as dangerous and it eventually has consequences between father and daughter. Neither father nor daughter is aware at first that the access to school could some day create a rift between them, since her education is the portal to the written word. Words are a source of freedom for the narrator; however, as predicted, words also lead to a love letter that creates the first rupture between father and daughter: “Viendra l’heure pour elle où l’amour qui s’écrit est plus dangereux que l’amour séquestré” (11). The escorted walk to school symbolizes the first steps into a new world. The shift from the initial pleasant memory is quick. Stepping into the world of the written word will eventually bring a love letter to her doorstep and causes her father’s outrage that becomes forbidding. A once proud father is enraged. “Le père, secoué d’une rage sans éclats, a déchiré devant moi la missive. Il ne me la donne à lire; il la jette au panier” (12). This banishment is not going to result in being turned off of love or “the love letter” as the narrator becomes obsessed with love or rather forbidden love.

After this very short introduction to a young woman’s education in the matters of love through language, the next chapter jumps to the French colonial invasion. The parallel reading of a violent image with the first pains of childhood indicates that her inner growth is affected by actions that took place over a century earlier. Like the unsolicited letter of love that comes crashing in to disturb the balance between father and daughter, the invading army shows up, and unexpectedly creates a rift where there was once peace and even harmony between two nations. The pattern of using a linking word continues throughout this first part of the novel, and so it is understood that her formation will take place along the same route as Algeria’s.
The decision to start the narrative with the story about school provokes an obvious correlation to the Bildungsroman. A central theme for the genre is education; however, the introduction of school followed by the problematic question of language and the written word recalls a theme that is important to most writers from the Maghreb, who write in French. In his book *Maghreb Pluriel*, Abdelkebir Khatibi begins his chapter entitled “Bilinguisme et littérature” with a famous joke in the Maghreb that I will paraphrase here: It took us (about) fourteen centuries to learn Arabic, (about) a century to learn French and over a period of time stretching too far back to remember we cannot write Berber. This is to highlight the regions ongoing issues with plurilingualism. He goes on to note that those writers from the Maghreb who write in French are constantly writing in translation. That gives the impression that everything is expressed via a filter since translation is never accurate and is always somewhat interpretive. Assia Djebar always writes in French since her education has led to her inability to express herself with the same ease in Arabic. According to Khatibi, her rewriting of history is in translation and hence has this added layer of subjectivity. This link between subjectivity, identity and education is yet another parallel to the form of the Bildungsroman.

The following two anecdotal sections continue to deal with the theme of forbidden love. The first of these is the chapter entitled “Trois jeunes filles cloîtrées …”, and it tells the story of the narrator’s visits to the countryside. She is away from home, kept behind closed doors like the three sisters she is staying with and she seeks freedom by participating in little acts of rebellion. These acts result in new experiences, which shows how she forms her ideals. The events experienced here also provide insight to her
adult self. There is a pecking order in the hamlet and the older women at the countryside watch over the younger ones to ensure adherence to traditions. The narrator finds a partner in the youngest of the sisters. They are at once fascinated by these women and fear them. One, very old, senile woman draws their attention while they are paralyzed by their fear of her outcries. These cries are like warnings; when the narrator is later teased about a possible suitor for marriage, she rejects the possibility vehemently: “Je trépigne, je bats du pied, un malaise ambigu exagère ma colère puérile” (20). This rejection is then coupled with another as the next paragraph describes the trespassing of the narrator and the youngest sister. Rather than wait in fear of being promised in marriage to a man, a stranger, the two young girls take steps towards discovering another mystery man, the older brother whom they also fear. When they enter the brother’s room and discover his secret stash of erotic photographs, the girls see a weakened brother. The façade is shattered. This empowering intrusion has matured them, which draws a connection between rebellion and inner growth. A shift in power takes place and this gives the youngest of the sisters the power to later exclaim, albeit late at night and speaking from the privacy of her bed, that she will never marry a stranger.

Jamais, jamais, je ne me laisserai marier un jour à un inconnu qui, en une nuit, aurait le droit de me toucher ! C’est pour cela que j’écris! Quelqu’un viendra dans ce trou perdu pour me prendre : il sera un inconnu pour mon père ou mon frère, certainement pas pour moi ! (24)

Following this statement the narrator makes a prediction that is the link to the next chapter: “Je pressentais que, derrière la torpeur du hameau, se préparait, insoupçonné, un étrange combat de femmes” (25). This battle echoes the ones to come in the following chapter. Like the struggles of a young woman refusing to be married off to a stranger, the
battle to stay independent of France is also raging. In the chapter about the cloistered sisters, the written word helped them to forge a private independence, as they had been educated enough to read and write and this provided the opportunity for correspondence with young Arab men throughout the Muslim world. Now, in the chapter labeled II of the first part of the book the foreign correspondents are reporting, in a subjective manner. This threatens the freedom of a people and has a dehumanizing effect.

Un mois après, Barchou se souvient donc et écrit : "Des femmes, qui se trouvent toujours en grand nombre à la suite des tribus arabes, avaient montré le plus d’ardeur à ces mutilations. L’une d’elles gisait à côté d’un cadavre français dont elle avait arraché le cœur ! Une autre s’enfuyait, tenant un enfant dans ses bras : blessée d’un coup de feu, elle écrasa avec une pierre la tête de l’enfant, pour l’empêcher de tomber vivant dans nos mains; les soldats l’achevèrent elle-même à coup de baïonnette" (31).

The images of the strong yet defiant women that are the sisters in the previous chapter are now turned into caricatures. The gaze of the foreigners has distorted the image of the Algerian woman. These accounts are not immediately perceived as examples of the Bildungsroman but it does provide a support in completing the image of the narrator’s environment. The stories from French officials are now a part of the obstacle that the narrator as a Bildungsromanheld must overcome.

The gaze is reversed in the chapter “La fille du gendarme français …”, as is seen when the narrator states: “Car, pour moi, les demeures françaises exhalaient une odeur différente, reflétaient une lumière secrète – ainsi mon œil reste fasciné par le rivage des ‘Autres’” (38). Watching the daughter of the French policeman kiss her beloved so openly leaves the young narrator and the other females of the hamlet stunned. The gossip that this young French woman initiates leaves a mark on the narrator. Her vanity is off-putting
and her terms of endearment for her lover have given the narrator a new conviction, that the French language offers intellectual treasures yet offers little value in matters of the heart. The perception of the young girl who at the outset of the story was led to her first experience of love through words is exposed to a perception that there are limitations to this language.

At the end of the first part another incident occurs, which mirrors the incident of the love letter in the first chapter. In a chapter called “Mon père écrit à ma mère” a postcard arrives home. This incident shocks the neighbors, since the postcard was directly addressed to his wife and three kids. This seems in line with a father who would take his daughter to school under the watchful eye of a skeptical community. The incident precedes the capture of Algiers. A father attempts to liberate his family from “home” by referring to them as the free individuals that they are, and Algiers and its citizens are about to live their last few days of freedom from the occupiers. With this kind of freedom we know that our heroine is not restricted and that she has an element that will allow for her to transcend her reality and acquire self-actualization. It seems her father’s problems and restrictions on love from the first chapter take an opposite form and he is secretly aiding her journey to freedom. The father that was once feared in matters of love has shown that love for his family deserves the respect of addressing them directly.

This first part ends with the narrator being given an example of mature love. As her parents’ relationship is changed by the simple yet defiant act of the postcard from her father to her mother, she too is changed inwardly by this little revolution against tradition at both fronts, national and private.
J’ai été effleurée, fillette aux yeux attentifs, par ces bruissements de femmes reléguées. Alors s’ébaucha, me semble-t-il, ma première intuition du bonheur possible, du mystère, qui lie un homme et une femme.

Mon père avait osé "écrire" à ma mère. L’un et l’autre, mon père par l’écrit, ma mère dans ses nouvelles conversations où elle citait désormais sans fausse honte son époux, se nommaient réciproquement, autant dire s’aimaient ouvertement (58).

The theme of rebellion is prominent in this novel and we saw earlier that the act of rebelling is expected for the female Bildungsroman heroine. In the case of Djebar’s novel her journey is echoed in the actions of the people of Algeria during all three phases of their colonial history.

For the women of the tribe, it is only one of the steps along this path. “[W]e are alerted to a condition in which development for the female heroine operates against implacable forces” (Labovitz 75). Once the female rebellion takes place there is scant possibility for her to go back. She is not like the male hero who will leave home for self-discovery and along the way is often portrayed as free to choose sublime transcendent experiences, mere dalliances or even risqué encounters and then (echoing Homer) come home wise, strong and rich. Rather she is often forced to make a break from which there is no return, only the outward trajectory. She is transcending her societal lot at the cost of total severance. “For the male hero, within the traditional Bildungsroman, this structured society works, ultimately, in his favor. He travels away from home and structure for a period of rebelling, but sooner or later reconciles himself to his role in society” (Labovitz 75). Djebar’s narrator is not the only entity growing beyond a safe return to home. The loss of home suffered by the people of Algeria is also the result of an irreversible break.

In the second part of the book, resistance to the occupation gains importance in the prose
indicating that there is a definite shift in the search for identity. It is therefore understandable that there is now also a reversal in the order of the chapters. The historical documentation now precedes the anecdotal and biographical elements as the tensions increase.

The second part opens with the accounts of events from the battlefront in the form of letters. These are intimate accounts that seek to describe the seemingly indescribable atrocities of the occupation. The narrator feels disturbed by the perpetrators of such evil much more than the acts themselves. She later compares these to love letters. These self-assertions show how writing, for the narrator, gives her a sense of self. The letters that supposedly describe her from her lover’s point of view cannot do the same justice. She only bears to read them once. The written word gives identity and proves existence. The lover and occupier are both “the other”. The narrator’s chief complaint is that the lover, through his gaze, cannot capture her true self. That the words lack and even omit: “Ces lettres, je le perçois plus de vingt ans après, voilà l’amour plus qu’elles ne l’exprimaient, et presque par contrainte allègre : car l’ombre du père se tient là”(87). Then later as she reads it, it has a distancing effect: “Le message de l’autre se gonfle parfois d’un désir qui me parvient, mais expurgé de toute contagion. La passion, une fois écrite, s’éloignait de moi définitivement” (87). This draws the parallel to the letters written from the battlefront, which due to the nature of the gaze of their authors is that of an outsider; it serves only to remove meaning rather than provide it. The other is not capable of writing the other. As far as the narrator’s journey is concerned, this presents an obstacle to her Bildung as it skews even her own perception of self. The
*Bildungsromanheld* is always looking to journey back into society and this includes solidifying a courtship with the other and this is certainly not easily achieved through the distortion that is being created here in the written word. Algeria suffers the protagonist’s fate at the words used to describe the violence.

In the third part, in what should be the homecoming we have the transcriptions of the native women from various parts of the country. This time they are given an opportunity to voice their experience. This is the spoken word now, provided by the women who were witnesses. Their active role in the resistance and rebellion is captured and the only distancing is the fact that we have the transcriptions on paper and that they are in translation. This act extends her formation outward and gives rise to an occasion for a unifying identity to be reclaimed.

This collection of stories is multiple yet singular in its effect. The journey of many women and young men leaves the reader with a sense of more than just the identity of an individual young woman. She is also Algeria and Algeria is her. She represents the Arab and Berber people who inhabited these lands before the violent interruption of colonialism threatened their existence. Now they are reclaimed in her ability to rewrite their story, allowing them to be uncovered within the same journey. The narrative presents a trajectory of the journey she has taken and this follows the structure of the Bildungsroman. Djebar’s heroine, her own persona, is put at the center of the narrative to guide the transformation of the history she is reclaiming. Through tribulations and obstacles, her growth is both inner and outer and reflected in the collective. She and Algeria have taken the steps to come of age but the journey remains incomplete since the
instability of the postcolonial era continues. The tracing of these histories is a start to the process. The forward motion of the novel mirrors the optimism of the realist literary movement that was the start of the Bildungsroman.
Chapter IV

GROWING(UP)ROOTED: Coming home in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *Les Yeux baissés*

The narrative of *Les Yeux baissés* follows a structure that is more linear, in that it is the story of one young woman, though changes in tone and significant leaps in time as the story progresses do occur. It is the immigrant story told from the perspective of a young girl named Fathma.¹ In comparison to the Djebar novel the parallels to the Bildungsroman are perhaps more obvious in *Les Yeux baissés*, as the arc of the story follows the protagonist from childhood through adolescence, until she finally arrives at adulthood. The coming-of-age story is complicated by her state of “in-betweeness” that results in hallucinations and dreamscapes that plague the heroine. Fantastical elements, which is a style that Tahar Ben Jelloun is known for reflects the instability of the narrator’s environment and that of her peers.

The book begins with the tale of a secret obligation that is passed down through generations. The nature of the secret is shrouded in mystery but what is known is that the young narrator is the final heir to the secret and will be required to fulfill a destiny that will greatly impact the life of the villagers in her homeland. This obligation haunts the narrator throughout her ascension to adulthood. Her desire to keep away from her homeland, which she flees with her family, leads to some disturbing results. This is a

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¹ Fathma’s name is only mentioned once throughout the novel.
protagonist that is in the midst of becoming through her act of shedding her responsibility to the secret mission. “The young heroine arrives at her ‘inner standing,’ in part, through recognition of the role rebellion plays in a family and society where custom and place for women, in particular, was fixed and determined” (Labovitz 75). This act though not extreme in the book is part of this narrator’s journey as the Bildungsromanheldin\(^2\) eager to achieve self-actualization.

Just as Djebar’s novel does, the book opens with a departure. The story of the secret as it journeys from ancestor to ancestor must now find its way to the new keeper. “Aujourd’hui, la dépositaire du secret est une grand-mère. Elle attend le retour de sa petite-fille qui, seule, possède la clé du trésor” (12). The implication that the old woman is waiting for the return of the young woman who can hold the key is that she must be chosen for this type of journey. This seems at odds with a hero who is not fully formed. In order to carry out such a task she must already possess some special trait that does not require an apprenticeship. We soon learn, however, that she is not entirely convinced of her role and it takes her the entire novel to feel prepared for such a task. Even then, she is not convinced of her abilities. Therefore this is not a novel of adventure, and to differentiate further from that genre the text provides clarity when the narrator asks\(^3\):

“Mais le sait-elle elle-même ?” (12). Only a heroine who is innocent could be unaware of her secret treasure. The location of the treasure is to be found by tracing the lines in the hand of Fathma the narrator; however, despite this fact, she is skeptical about this

\(^2\) Bildungsroman heroine

\(^3\) The novel is bookended by the story of the secret and those two separate sections have a third-person omniscient narrator.
providing an opening for personal growth and self-acceptance. The young heroine must also come to terms with the burden of carrying this treasure. Unlike what Labovitz uncovered about the limitations of the expectations of a female Bildungsroman hero, here Ben Jelloun’s heroine bears great responsibility and encounters expectations of fulfilling a particular place in society. Her trajectory must come full circle, but unlike Homer’s hero Odysseus she is not expected to change by returning but by staying. She is expected to keep the tradition alive. This hinders her freedom; recalling what Kontje revealed about the need for individual freedom in achieving her formation, it is understandable that the young narrator would choose to try and break with this tradition. Ironically in her case it seems abandoning her role is a form of growth.

The first chapter begins with the word “L’horizon” and this has initially a distancing effect. The image this conjures up shifts as the phrase continues with “n’est pas bien loin ; avec les nuages il se rapproche, vient jusqu’à notre village” (13). This desire to bring a far-off land towards the narrator is the heroine’s attempt at seeking out experiences away from the familiar in order to bring about growth. She is currently at a fixed point, but she climbs trees in order to improve her vantage point to see further out. This unbearable pull towards this horizon ultimately leads to her journey away from the village to France. She refers to France as “lafrance”⁴, but remains tied to her village due to the “secret”. Bearing in mind that this particular coming-of-age story is an immigration story as well, this attachment to the village left behind is symbolic of the inescapable ties to one’s origins. As opposed to the Bildungsroman hero who ventures away from home, 

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⁴ This spelling of la France used in the book illustrates the naiveté of the narrator that hears both “la” and “France” as one word, as if it were a concept rather than a country.
the shifting of the location of home complicates the formation and ascension to adulthood for the young immigrant. This outcome threatens the success of her journey. The Bildungsroman heroes are in training. Throughout their journey they are in preparation for a return home. For Fathma, now that she has relocated with her family, where is home? Which society will she integrate into?

On the surface Les Yeux baissés is a common immigrant story. The story is however narrated by the young Fathma, a girl with a very active mind and curiosity that serves her well at first. The story of the treasure in the mountain serves as the connection to the myth of old self and represents a narrative style more common in non-Western cultures. These fantastical elements evoke a sense of the disorientation felt by the young female protagonist. Her anxiety is created by the bilocation of her upbringing. The exaggerated tales have structures similar to those of fables. They have morals used mostly to illustrate a lesson to the tribe. There is one fable told by her terribly cruel aunt about a foreign stranger who hides out in the woods who will kidnap Fathma if she ventures that way. Fortunately, this fable only encourages her since, in her mind, the stranger offers her an escape to the much dreamed about France.

Au lieu de passer la nuit à trembler de peur, j’eus une réaction inverse : j’étais nerveuse de bonheur ! Je me voyais enlevée par ce beau chevalier – entre-temps je lui aurais procuré un superbe cheval – et emmenée loin de ce village hanté par le Malheur et la solitude (36).

While fantasizing about this stranger who will whisk her away to a better place she is sure to add that it is she who will provide the ideal mode of transport. The heroine’s eagerness to leave home is reminiscent of a young Jane Eyre from the English tradition of the Bildungsroman, but she wants to be somewhat in charge of this escape.
France for her has an air of mystery and fantasy that surrounds it and it provides her with ample opportunity to grow through newly acquired skills or knowledge, which she craves. This is evident in the second chapter when she describes the Koranic school she is kept from attending.


She is in fact so desperate to learn that she ventures into this forbidden space dressed as her brother. When caught she flees quickly but not without realizing that education was her ultimate dream. “Depuis ce jour, l’école devint mon rêve unique. Pas celle-là qui n’aimait pas les filles, mais l’autre, celle qui forme des ingénieurs, des professeurs, des pilotes …” (27). Since the protagonist does not belong to a community that would be conducive to this kind of goal she must then set herself on a course to leave her home.

This is the start of the seductive journey of the immigrant. This is a topic near and dear to Ben Jelloun (Bousta 7) and one that he has written about at great length. His book *Hospitalité Française* is an authoritative look at the racism and hardship unique to the experience of immigrants in France. Tahar Ben Jelloun also writes about the immigrant experience in fiction, where he finds a way to interweave the different styles of narrative that represent his own existence in a Third Space.

Cependant, l’originalité de cet écrivain réside dans son art de saisir tous ces aspects de la tradition et de la culture maghrébine dans une symbiose très singulièr avec le vécu quotidien et les problèmes sensibles de la société, pris dans les vertiges de la mémoire et de l’imaginaire en gestation (Bousta 7).

The struggles encountered by the immigrant are similar to those of the Bildungsroman
heroine as they are both part of a marginalized segment of the population to various degrees. Being both female and an immigrant makes the journey of her formation more interesting. The German Bildungsromane were examples of the individual exerting his or her free will over his or her destiny. The struggle to shape one’s own destiny and establish one’s lot in life is certainly more easily attained with individual freedom. The rights of the individual man to freedom of movement and freedom of thought were uncontested assumptions in the German Bildungsromane, an assumption explicitly and deliberately not made for the female protagonist of the nineteenth century European novel. Similarly, freedom for the Maghrebian depicted in literature about the immigrant is not granted. In Brinda Mehta’s “Alienation, Dispossession, and the Immigrant Experience in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s Les Yeux baissés,” the focus is on the unique experience of the immigrant tale and the implications that a female protagonist strongly bears on plot and story. It is unlike the more familiar story that centers on challenging acts of the male journey; thus we find that the gender of the Bildungsromanheld impacts coming-of-age narratives in many ways. Mehta writes:

The choice of a female protagonist amid a corpus of male-oriented literary representations adds an interesting dimension to the portrait of the immigrant. The search for self is complicated by the introduction of a female protagonist who has to embark on a duplicitous journey as an immigrant, and more so, as a woman from a traditional non-Western heritage to an alien Western reality (80).

It is almost as though whatever conclusion is reached when examining the added hardship faced by a female heroine can be doubled for the North African heroine in light of her added alienation, both as a citizen of formerly colonized lands and as a female in those societies. She goes on to note:
The female immigrant is the victim of a double alterity obliging her to come to terms with two levels of strangeness, involving her in a search that is far more complex than that of her male counterpart. While both hero and heroine undergo a primeval splitting of self in an effort to cope with their new life while simultaneously remaining faithful to their North African roots, the female, on the other hand, suffers several layers of irreparable splitting, rendering the process of adaptation virtually impossible. […] The protagonist of Les Yeux baissés” is inscribed within the confines of these realities, beginning her voyage at a disadvantage which suggests an abortive attempt at self-realization (80).

This ability to merge these additional elements does not alter the aesthetic quality of the novel but makes for a more engaging plot. This book includes another aspect of the Ben Jelloun novel and that is the importance of bringing those who live in the margins of society, “mettant en scène des sujets tabous ou des êtres exclus de la parole” (Bousta 8) to the forefront. The young protagonist deals very openly with demons as she is haunted by the many figments of her imagination that she is convinced are real. She has ways of bending the perceptions of her mind and transporting herself into alternative realms. This protects her from the senseless death that surrounds her living in the Paris banlieue.

Eventually the escapes are detrimental and she must make strides to find her inner peace. These delusions also impede her formation as she is trying to integrate into society. She comes dangerously close to experiencing the doomed endings associated with those nineteenth-century English heroines.

The incident that catalyzed her departure from her village by the mountain haunts her throughout the narrative as well. The awaited departure from the village only came in the aftermath of a horrible family tragedy. The death of her young brother brings her father back home temporarily to take his wife and surviving child with him to France. He had already been living on his own there and providing for his family from a distance.
The death was the result of an act of revenge gone wrong, according to the narrator. Her evil aunt had poisoned her brother, wrongly blaming him for a prank pulled by Fathma. The prank, though clever, clearly was the work of an immature heroine but the shock of watching the light of life leaving her brother’s body provided her with the first profound growing experience. The intensity of her experiences continues at an even pace. Her displacement and feelings of alienation accompany her as she moves to France with her family. This becomes a double journey, experienced internally and externally, similar to that of a Bildungsroman hero. Her inner journey manifests itself in lucid dreams. There is one incident where she dreams of the giant letters of the alphabet that are suddenly confronting and frightening her. They attack her and try to empty her head of all she has just learned. Then there is the miniature war between the French words and the words from her Berber vocabulary (80/81), adding to her anxiety around the education she is receiving and her desperation to belong to the land where she finds herself. With her father by her side she can obtain an education, which even affords her freedom in the area of love.

Despite this knowledge she has only a few indiscretions, but she knows how not to upset this fortunate situation. She does not want to suffer the fate of some of her peers. This is perhaps a limited freedom, but due to the support of her parents it is not as much of a hindrance. Like the parents in Djebar’s novel, these parents are role models for change.
Through her new opportunities and acquaintances in France, Fathma grows further and further away from her village in her memories. She does her best to integrate into her adoptive homeland despite some common hurdles in language and cultural setbacks.

Her temporary returns to the village in the book create periods of distress every time. She is adamant to stay put in France and never visit the village. She is haunted by the thought of meeting the friends and acquaintances left behind. When she does go back to the village she feels trapped again and her fear of being trapped causes the heroine to have a psychotic break upon her return to France. Her distraught mind creates people and things that are not real. One in particular is Victor, who becomes increasingly hostile. Her shedding of this ghost comes with a suggestion from a beloved teacher. Fathma is sent to meet with a writer who shares her background and encourages her to write as a means to escape these demons. She learns here to be selfish enough to write away fictitious Victor’s power over her. Her formation and writing skill are what save her from the destiny of Bildungsroman heroines who have gone mad in the past. She is helped by others in her formation; however, the helpful figure is more prominently male in contrast to the helping female personas of Djebar’s novel.

In the final chapters the heroine does return to her village, somewhat of her own accord, to prove the success of her journey. She is past the age of maturity and she must now fulfill her destiny. She has little conviction of its success but her French husband is very encouraging. Again it is the male that is guiding her trajectory. She returns to fulfill her destiny out of a sense of obligation. It turns out that the treasure is a spring well in the
mountain needed for the very survival of the village. Along the way she encounters various ceremonies and rites of passage that now seem so foreign to her.

There is an ambivalent sense that she is not really returning but rather being both pulled and pushed home. We learn in flash backs that the once passionate young girl has hardened. She has seen too much and is aggravated by the comparatively benign problems of her Western husband. Her last stage represents an arrested development. This is evident by her slow descent back into madness as she climbs the mountain surrounded by all the villagers. She flees the village fearing she has failed, but it is in her life in France where things are not whole. Her husband must leave her because he cannot bring her satisfaction. Her bilocation has removed the point of return or maybe it moves back and forth too many times and the journey cannot be completed in any other manner.

As she sits alone in the apartment she shared with her husband in Paris, she learns that he is now in her village and that they are indeed saved albeit unwillingly by her. Fulfilling her destiny, she also left her birthplace, and there is no returning home. The immigrant’s journey displaces the home and the hero is irreversibly changed. Her growth, detectable inwardly and outwardly, makes her unable to stay in the village and feel neither connected nor able to relate to her husband. She has instead become fully integrated into Orlando’s Third Space.
Chapter V

CONCLUSION

This exercise in establishing a relationship between these Maghrebian texts written in French and the Bildungsroman is intended to add another layer of analysis. *L’Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Yeux baissés* cannot be categorized with one single criterion. The complexity of these texts is the result of a long tradition of Maghrebian literature that has been heavily influenced by the hybridity of their respective cultures in the aftermath of colonialism. The idea of grouping these authors as Maghrebian rather than treating them as one Algerian writer and one Moroccan writer has its share of problems as well. However, as a start it is helpful. Examining the use of young female protagonists that come of age in the narratives does not appear arbitrary, so investigating this is a valid pursuit. There was the added risk of diluting the traditional Bildungsroman and, from the Maghrebian perspective, there was a danger of appearing to apply criticism reserved for European literature, which is counter to the current discourse. Emphasis was hence placed on the choice of character; each woman’s journey throughout the novel was examined for the purpose of gaining new insight from the experience of reading the novels.

I dedicated a portion of the introduction to showing how the Bildungsroman can be a term in evolution, a term well-applied after the texts that inspired it, and its
applicability to other corpora being a testament to its breadth of influence as a story
telling vehicle.

The mixture of tone and the inclusion of the fantastical as well as the use of
transcriptions of oral storytelling linked to family secrets, such as those found at the end
of Djebar’s and Ben Jelloun’s texts, as well as the various colorful characters throughout
the story who recount their own fables, are all part of the plurilingualuism found in
literature from the Maghreb. The question of using the French language is different for
both authors and is not very relevant to the discussion about the Bildungsroman so it has
been kept to a minimum. It is however interesting to note that for both stories the issues
of language and education were of central importance. As has been discussed throughout
this thesis, the Bildungsroman features characters that attempt to exert their independence
and search for their place within society through the freedom to pursue their Bildung. It is
unusual to see the language that is associated with the oppressing power being utilized for
freedom. Expression in the French language reduces the subversive nature of using a
native language and leans the text towards greater acceptance. Tahar Ben Jelloun
mentions that writing in French just comes naturally. The English department website at
Emory University posts a quote by Tahar Ben Jelloun exclaiming, “I feel freer in
French,” and then, “Arabic is my wife and French is my mistress; and I have been
unfaithful to them both,” Assia Djebar not only writes in French, but also is one of the
immortels for being among the keepers of the French language via the Académie
Française. Clearly the French language is important to the formation of these writers and
is not a hindrance. In Djebar’s case, as her novel is autobiographical it is certainly an important element in the journey of the Bildungsroman heroine of her novel.

Both novels close without a “happy ending.” There will be no triumphant parade expected upon the heroine’s return since not returning is the cost for her Bildung, a cost that can only be paid by giving up the right to ever return home. The hero’s home is now seen as a place that started the coming-of-age aspects of the story but eventually was an obstacle for the enlightened, mature self. In pointing to the ending of dramas, Moretti introduces a selected analysis by citing some essential and seminal Bildungsroman examples in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*.

If the ending is perhaps the most problematic aspect of Pushkin's (*Eugene Onegin*) and Stendhal's (*The Red and the Black*) works, which seem 'interrupted' more than 'concluded', this is because the only truly consistent ending - the happy ending- is here inconceivable. [...] The achievement of happiness for its part, makes one wish time would stop and strengthens the ending's sense of closure. - This is precisely what took place in the classical Bildungsroman such as *Wilhelm Meister* and *Pride and Prejudice*; and the amalgam of time, meaning, happiness and closure was especially suited for emphasizing the irreversible move from youthful experiments to mature identity, and for portraying individual formation as inseparable from and -'in the end'-directly coinciding with social integration (118).

Both novels exemplify this happy-unhappy ending and have thus satisfied the criteria that were set out that provide a link to the Bildungsroman tradition.

In the Bildungsroman tradition the inner journey was as important as the outer journey. The inner journey was part of the hero’s rehabilitation, filling his need to grow into his fully formed self. For a nation or a people that have lost a part of their identity through the intrusion of colonialism, a tendency to move towards a means of expression that highlights a reclaiming of self appears a natural progression and arguably a necessary
step. Initially for *Bildung*, God played a large role. It is interesting to note that in these novels as in the time of Goethe, the individual is the instigator of change and development. Maghrebian literature is often wrongly referred to as Arabo-Muslim (Noiray 9); however, the autochthon peoples of North Africa are varied in their religion and ethnicity. The role of tribal traditions seems to be favored in the narratives and its influence on individual characters’ development is seen prominently with Fathma in *Les Yeux baissés*.

Gender remains the last important factor. A genre that seemed once to favor the male protagonist now seems better suited to the female. I have shown that the female protagonists of these two novels have benefited from being characterized as Bildungsroman heroines; however, more research needs to be done in this area. As suggested several times in *The Voyage In*, the use of female protagonists appears to be the tendency across many genres.

This thesis has pointed to the possibility of making the elements of the Bildungsroman part of the analysis when evaluating Maghrebian works that have a coming-of-age component in the story arc. The genre has always acted as a mirror to society and its struggles. It is a useful aspect of the narrative to consider. In particular, it is of interest when considering that the presence of the Bildungsroman form can indicate that the state of the society inhabited by a protagonist is in flux. For North African writers, a rapidly shifting society and the displacement of populations present a destabilizing environment for characters to navigate. In addition, the marginalized or disenfranchised segment of the population that is represented through these characters
has more difficulty achieving *Bildung* in the face of social instability. This increases the intrigue of their journey to adulthood where they are expected to enter a mainstream, Westernized culture. In making the case for applying the Bildungsroman as a critical framework to literature from the Maghreb with a central female character coming-of-age, the conclusion is in favor of the validity of my approach. For both stories about women in the Maghreb and Maghrebian women in France, many interesting questions remain to be explored to further the context and its wider applicability beyond these two coming-of-age stories.
Works Cited


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