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## Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction, by Stella Bolaki.

Ania Spyra  
Butler University, [aspyra@butler.edu](mailto:aspyra@butler.edu)

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*Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction.* Stella Bolaki. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011. 283 pp. (Cloth US\$ 81.00)

Stella Bolaki gives us in *Unsettling the Bildungsroman* a useful review of the rich corpus of *Bildungsroman* scholarship already existing, invoking Franco Moretti, Iris Marion Young, Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, Martin Japtok, Rosemary Marangoly George, Pin-chia Feng, and many others. In order to situate her own intervention in this field, she goes back to early definitions of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, which saw radical individualism and upward mobility as the most desired end of the *Bildung's* trajectory. Then, drawing on *Bildungsromane* by contemporary ethnic American women writers—her examples include Jamaica Kincaid, Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Audre Lorde—she offers the concept of “bound motion,” aimed at a more complex relationship with the community. Rather than focusing only on novels, Bolaki also brings into her book life-writing and narratives of trauma, illness, and death in order to reinvigorate the debate around *Bildungsroman*. She does not see these narratives as binary opposites of the genre, but as its necessary supplements, which describe their own complementary vision of an “art of living.” By changing the genre’s simplistic teleology of a consistent development toward a coherent identity, feminist ethnic fictions show that the greatest potential transformation comes from an ability to look back instead of constantly moving forward.

Here is where the most interesting argument of Bolaki’s book resides. She proposes to study the genre of *Bildungsroman* in combination with trauma theory and recent investigations into bad emotions and the paralyzing imperative of happiness. Though I find it surprising and an oversight that Lauren Berlant’s work didn’t make it more forcefully into Bolaki’s engagement with the critiques of happiness, she nevertheless draws on an already impressive catalog of sources. Supporting her insights with Sara Ahmed’s work on unhappiness, classic work by Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth on trauma, and David L. Eng’s on mourning, Bolaki suggests that the heroines of the ethnic coming-of-age narratives subvert the very idea of *Bildung* not only in the traditional genre but also in the U.S. national narrative.

Bolaki focuses on American fiction because it is in the United States that the mythos of *Bildungsroman* is at its strongest. The narrative of the country

itself is of the “pull yourself by the bootstraps” kind. Values of “exceptionalism, individualism, mobility, freedom, the American Dream, and transcendence” (p. 21) are sold to immigrants as the values of American society. To be a successful immigrant, one has to adapt to this narrative; Bolaki asks what happens when one—especially if one is not a heterosexual man—does not? The opposition between cultural nationalism and assimilation is a simplistic one, and the authors Bolaki selects always gesture toward other possible solutions (p. 89). While not every chapter deals with immigrants, all deal with the problem of assimilation to the overarching narrative of American optimism.

Each chapter of the book centers almost exclusively on select publications of a single writer. Chapter 1, devoted to Jamaica Kincaid, is of greatest interest to readers of Caribbean literature and Caribbean Studies scholars. Titled “Female Traveling in the West/Indies: Trauma and Bound Motion in Jamaica Kincaid’s *At the Bottom of the River* and *Lucy*,” it introduces the notion of “bound motion” that is central to the whole project. The title’s oblique stroke between West and Indies is somewhat confusing since the chapter deals mainly with traveling in the West and in the United States in particular. While mobility is usually seen as empowering in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, here it causes trauma and melancholic remembrance. Kincaid’s *Lucy*, for example, narrates the story of a young woman who travels to the United States to work as a nanny and deals with the happiness imperative once there. Residing among the privileged classes of New York makes it all the more obvious to her that the experiences of slavery and colonialism cannot be simply wished away. The imperative for happiness only aims at erasure of their continuing reverberations and perpetuation of social oppression. No wonder Kincaid herself (quoted in Bolaki p. 24) has described her job as making everyone a bit less happy.

If Chapter 1 tells an immigrant’s story, Chapters 2 and 3 center on the conflict between values of individuality and community in the generations that follow. Bolaki suggests that the unusual use of vignette in *The House on Mango Street*, which offers a variety of perspectives and narrators, affords Sandra Cisneros a way out of the binary between independence and cultural community. This proves more difficult for Maxine Hong Kingston. As Bolaki shows, Kingston’s attempts at translating her transnational experience into a space of belonging have been less successful, at least from the point of view of her national community. Chapter 4 describes a similar

search by the invisible subject of an African-American lesbian, Audre Lorde, who finds the way of belonging within her own traumatized body.

The book relies heavily on quotations and references, rather than depending on a confident voice of its author, which makes reading less fluent and pleasurable than I at least would have desired. However, I found myself noting down those various references for use in my teaching. The erudite bibliography will be helpful to all those teaching immigrant or ethnic American fiction and texts by transnational women writers. Bolaki's insights could also provide a useful corrective to courses on the traditional, optimistic *Bildungsroman*.

Ania Spyra  
Department of English, Butler University  
Indianapolis IN 46240, U.S.A.  
aspyra@butler.edu