

Reconfiguring Development in the Postcolonial Female Bildungsroman: Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* and the Limits of Teleology

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Abstract—This study re-examines the concept of development through the lens of the classical genre of bildungsroman, while interrogating its teleology, coherence, and integration, which have historically been rooted in European modernity and colonial epistemology. While postcolonial and feminist studies have highlighted the exclusions inherent in this genre, there is a dearth of conceptual terms to think through alternative forms of development. In this context, this article seeks to address this gap by using Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* (2020) as a text that actively theorizes development in situations of epistemic instability, relational ambivalence, and postcolonial constraint. This study uses a theoretical close reading method, engaging with Spivak's concept of epistemic exclusion, Bhabha's concept of third space, and Boehmer's concept of narrative resistance. *Burnt Sugar* uses fragmented temporality, unreliable narration, and resistance to closure to reconfigure development as a non-teleological, recursive process that is shaped by memory, trauma, and unresolved relational dynamics. This study makes three contributions: one, rethinking development as survival-in-relation; two, using unreliable narration to think through subjectivity in situations of epistemic instability; and, three, rethinking the postcolonial female bildungsroman as a counter-genre that challenges the colonial logic of development. Thus, this article contributes to a rethinking of development as a non-teleological, recursive, and relational process rather than one that is rooted in coherence, integration, or closure.

Index Terms—postcolonial female bildungsroman, development theory, epistemic instability, maternal ambivalence, unreliable narration

I. INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to “develop” when development itself has historically served as a justificatory logic of colonial modernity? The classical genre of the bildungsroman, emerging out of late eighteenth-century European literature with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (1795–96), has long been seen as a foundational genre of personal development through a linear progression towards social integration. Foundational theorists such as Moretti (1987, p. 5) write of the genre as “the symbolic form through which modernity recognizes itself,” while Bakhtin (1986, p. 23) writes of it as a narrative of “man's emergence in real historical time,” stressing personal transformation through engagement with historical forces. However, such a notion of development is premised upon a teleological model of development, coherent subjectivities, and stable social forms—all of which are ultimately embedded within a bourgeois, masculine, and European epistemological tradition. When considered through a postcolonial lens, such a notion of development becomes increasingly untenable; revealing how such a notion of harmonious development is premised upon exclusions along lines of gender, race, class, and coloniality. In this way, the historical function of the classical genre of the bildungsroman cannot be disentangled from broader narratives of modernity and global circulation that have come to inform literary production and critical reception (Gikandi, 2001).

Such exclusionary practices have been subject to critical examination in the works of postcolonial and feminist theorists, revealing the inadequacy of the classical bildungsroman in capturing forms of subjectivity that are the result of marginalization, dislocation, and epistemic uncertainty. For instance, in the case of women's development, feminist critics like Fraiman (1993, p. 9) point out that the process of development is often marked by “unbecoming” instead of “becoming” as the female subject resists the dominant forms of marriage and domesticity, while Abel et al. (1983, p. 12) highlight the incompatibility of linear narrative progression with women's lives. In the case of the postcolonial subject, there is a strong emphasis on the colonial connotations of the bildungsroman narrative, revealing the inadequacy of the genre in capturing forms of subjectivity that are the result of colonial modernity's narrative of progress, civilization, and development. For instance, Esty (2012, p. 3) points out that the bildungsroman is “a colonial form, one that presupposes the possibility of individual maturation in relation to coherent national frameworks,” while Golban and Benli (2019, p.

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49) highlight the focus on “rupture, resistance, and fragmentation” in the case of the postcolonial bildungsroman, as opposed to the classical narrative of integration, resolution, and development. Recent theoretical interventions in the area of the bildungsroman reveal the need for re-examining the existing postcolonial approaches in the light of the new dynamics in global literature and the new forms of subjectivity (Goyal, 2022; Siskind, 2010). However, the existing conceptual vocabulary in the area of the new forms of development remains undertheorized, with terms like “fragmentation,” “non-linearity,” “narrative disruption,” etc., used descriptively, while the risk of the reduction of the narrative strategies to the level of symptoms of deviation from the dominant forms of development remains, as is the case in the recent intersection of the theoretical approaches in the area of literary theory and memory studies (Milewski & Wetenkamp, 2022).

The current study aims to resolve this theoretical dilemma by suggesting that Avni Doshi’s *Burnt Sugar* (2020) not only demonstrates the transformation of the genre but also offers a theory of development within the postcolonial and gendered context. The text revolves around the life of the protagonist, Antara, and her development is influenced by the abandonment of her mother and her own marginality. From the beginning, the theme of development has been problematized as the protagonist reflects on the absence of her mother: “Even after I was born, she would disappear every day, dripping with milk, leaving me unfed” (Doshi, 2020, p. 6). Hence, development does not happen in a linear fashion but as a recursive and fragmented form mediated by unreliable memory and relational tension. *Burnt Sugar* thus goes beyond the subversion of the bildungsroman genre and offers a theory of development as a form of becoming that is grounded in trauma and epistemic uncertainty. This theory of development resonates with the newly emerging Indian feminist literary theory that understands the theme of development as being mediated by the ambivalence and relational instability of the mother (Karmakar, 2022; Williamson, 2023).

In methodological terms, this article adopts what may be referred to as theoretical close reading. This is a method that seeks to treat literary works not as sites for the application of theory but as sites for theory itself. Rather than using theory as an explanatory framework for the text, this article engages in a dialogic relationship with Spivak (1988), Bhabha (2004), and Boehmer (2009), using the text to both illuminate and challenge theory.

Thus, this article is driven by the following theoretically generative questions: What theory of development does *Burnt Sugar* theorize through its formal innovations, and in what ways does this theory trouble the foundational assumptions in postcolonial and feminist theory about agency, time, and subject formation? In what ways does the novel’s narrative unreliability and time fragmentation operate not merely as literary devices but as epistemological sites that redefine what constitutes development in the context of epistemic exclusion? And finally, in what ways does the novel’s refusal of closure contribute to a reconceptualization of the postcolonial female bildungsroman as a genre that prioritizes “unbecoming” over “becoming,” and thus challenges the ideological assumptions underlying developmental teleology?

This article makes three related claims at a theoretical level. First, it offers a new understanding of development as survival-in-relation rather than independent achievement, illustrating how maternal ambivalence acts as a constitutive condition of subject formation rather than a hindrance to it. Second, it contends that unreliable narration in postcolonial women’s fiction acts as a methodological tool to represent epistemic exclusion, as described by Spivak (1988, p. 271), allowing for a formulation of subjectivity out of a context in which it is partially invisible. Finally, it offers a new understanding of the postcolonial women’s bildungsroman as a countergenre, rather than a derivative subgenre, revealing the colonial logic at work in developmental models more broadly. By placing *Burnt Sugar* within a broader tradition of postcolonial women’s writing, but also highlighting its originality as a work of fiction, this study contributes to current debates in postcolonial literary studies, revealing how narrative form can be a location of theoretical development and ideological critique.

Genealogies of the Indian English Female Bildungsroman

In order to appreciate the conceptual and formal innovations of *Burnt Sugar*, it is important to locate the novel in the larger tradition of the Indian English female bildungsroman. The classic European bildungsroman assumes a linear path towards social integration, but in the context of Indian Anglophone fiction, it has been characterized by an ongoing negotiation between individual subject formation and the determinations of postcolonial modernity, gender, and socio-political change. Female subject formation in this tradition does not follow a linear or teleological path but is mediated through tension, ambivalence, and resolution. Yet, as this section also makes clear, in previous works, even in the face of formal innovation, there is an element of narrative coherence and symbolic resolution that is lacking in *Burnt Sugar*.

One of the early instances of the development of the female character in Indian English fiction is the story of Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), in which the main character Laila struggles with the tensions between traditional and modern values in the historical setting of the Partition of India. While the novel focuses on the gender issues and the changes in society, there is still an element of resolution in the idea of development as a process of negotiation, in which the main character comes to a certain level of self-awareness, even though she does not become fully integrated into society.

In a similar vein, Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* (1985) refigures the genre of the bildungsroman in a political context in which the subjectivity of women is inextricably linked to the crises faced by the nation-state in the postcolonial world. The development of the protagonist is mediated through the political crisis of the Emergency period, implying that individual development cannot be disassociated from national history. Nevertheless, the text also manages

to present a certain level of coherence in its critical account of development in relation to clear ideological and historical currents.

The domestic space emerges as the site of feminine development in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), in which the protagonist Jaya negotiates the limitations of marriage, silence, and patriarchal expectation. Deshpande's main contribution is the emphasis on ambivalence as the very essence of feminine identity. Nevertheless, the narrative maintains its coherence through the device of introspection, allowing for self-recognitions that, while pragmatically inconclusive, are symbolically continuous. In the same manner, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) engages with mythological intertexts to suggest feminine development as mediated through narrative forms of storytelling and cultural legacy. While the novel disrupts linear development through its narrative complexity, it still maintains a framework in which meaning is available as a process of narrative reconstruction.

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (2000) is an important work in the development of the use of memory and temporal fragmentation in the construction of the self. The emphasis on sibling relationships and the impact of historical trauma in the novel challenges the idea of linear time and instead highlights the idea of the past in the present. However, while the novel is formally complex in its construction of the self, it is also one that points to a kind of reconciliation and the potential of the self to integrate fragmented experiences into a cohesive understanding of selfhood.

The most radical departure from the classical bildungsroman is evident in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) in its use of non-linear time, fragmented narrative, and its exploration of trauma, caste, and forbidden love, which questions the very idea of a coherent development. Its rejection of the classical resolution and its focus on the intransigence of loss make *The God of Small Things* an important precursor to *Burnt Sugar*. However, even in this case, there is a level of structural symmetry and aesthetic closure that points to the idea that, despite its fragmentary nature, the narrative is still containable.

With such a literary tradition, *Burnt Sugar* is a major milestone in the history of the Indian English female bildungsroman. While previous works deal with fragmentation within a framework that allows for coherence, reconciliation, or even symbolic solutions, Doshi's novel takes these characteristics to a point where such solutions are structurally not possible anymore. Fragmentation is not something that needs to be overcome or integrated anymore, but rather becomes the framework through which subjectivity is created. Development is thus no longer a movement towards stability, but rather a constant negotiation with instability.

Such a change is also in keeping with broader developments in Indian subjectivity in the twenty-first century, as marked by globalization and the rise of neoliberal individualism, as well as the collapse of the nationalist narratives of postcolonialism. Thus, Anjaria's (2019) work indicates how contemporary Indian fiction is breaking away from the developmental paradigms that characterized earlier postcolonial fiction. Similarly, Chakravorty's (2014) work indicates how South Asian fiction engages with and challenges the readerly expectations based on stereotypes developed in colonial and postcolonial fictions. Thus, *Burnt Sugar* is a text that challenges not only genre but also the ways in which challenges to genre are typically received.

What sets *Burnt Sugar* apart, then, is not the use of fragmentation, unreliable narrative, and temporal dislocation—features already well-established in earlier texts—but the degree to which these techniques are enlisted in the subversion of any notion of developmental teleology. That is, the novel does not provide an alternative model of coherence but redefines development as a state of perpetual incompleteness. In addition, insofar as it resists resolution at both the narrative and the conceptual levels, *Burnt Sugar* reconfigures the postcolonial female bildungsroman from a genre of crisis management into one of crisis as a permanent state.

From this genealogical understanding, the specific contribution of Doshi's novel can be more clearly seen. Rather than being an isolated example of formal experimentation, *Burnt Sugar* can be seen as the culmination of a trajectory in which the fundamental assumptions of the bildungsroman form have been progressively subverted. The specific contribution of *Burnt Sugar*, then, is that it makes explicit what was only partially articulated in earlier texts: namely, that development, in a postcolonial and gendered context, may not lead to integration and resolution, but is instead an ongoing negotiation with uncertainty, ambivalence, and epistemic limitation.

II. DISCUSSION

A. *The Problem of Genre: Why Burnt Sugar Demands Theoretical Reinvention*

The last section demonstrated that *Burnt Sugar* could not be fully understood within the traditional understanding of the bildungsroman as a genre of developmentally coherent narrative. This section continues that argument by demonstrating that it is not only a matter of the genre being subverted, but also that there is a fundamental conceptual flaw with the genre as a whole. Classical theories of the bildungsroman, as discussed by Moretti (1987) and Bakhtin (1986) imply that a stable temporal and social structure in which the individual develops and come to a reconciliation with the world around them. This is, however, not the case in *Burnt Sugar*, where the genre is effectively turned into a problem-space.

Such a change is not accomplished through any theorization but through the metacommentary in the novel itself. Antara's thinking about her name as "Un-Tara" (Doshi, 2020, p. 10) does not merely imply a fragmented identity but also expresses a theory of subject formation through negation. The prefix "un," in fact, does not merely reverse identity

but also proposes that the subject is formed through what it is not, thus undermining the assumption that growth leads to a formed and integrated subject.

Similarly, the description of the hippocampus as an “emptying vault” (p. 87) reconceives memory not as an accumulating archive but as a site of erosion. This image challenges the epistemological foundation of the bildungsroman—namely, the continuity of experience through memory—a condition increasingly interrogated in contemporary narrative theory (Vermeulen, 2022; Christ, 2022). When Antara describes selfhood as “a fragile alliance between my past and my present” (p. 134), the novel advances a conception of subjectivity as provisional, contingent, and continuously renegotiated, aligning with philosophical accounts of narrative identity as inherently unstable and interpretive (Schechtman, 2024).

It is not possible to discern the role of theory in these passages but rather to suggest that the novel proposes a theory that challenges the genre in question. The genre in this text is not the bildungsroman as a genre but as a space in which the underlying theory of the genre is challenged. The theory of development in this genre cannot be thought through in terms of integration but rather as a genre characterized by discontinuity and uncertainty.

B. *Temporality Without Teleology: Development as Recursive Survival*

From the perspective of genre as a problem space, the discussion turns to the theme of time and how *Burnt Sugar* proposes an alternative model of growth through its reworking of time. Although *Burnt Sugar* does not abandon linear growth in favor of an alternative, it replaces it with a recursive model in which the past and present are constantly revised. Antara’s description of events “falling...like a line of dominoes” (p. 89) implies a sense of causality, yet it also suggests a sense of unstoppable effect that cannot be fully understood or contained. Similarly, “identity...evaporating” (p. 90) implies not just a sense of instability but a gradual dissolution of temporal continuity.

This disjunction of time is in line with recent literary-theoretical approaches to dementia and the temporality of stories, which instead of seeing the episodic and fragmented character of time as a weakness; understand them as a structuring principle (Zimmermann, 2024; Lugea, 2022). This temporality of stories about dementia requires a rethinking of the concept of development beyond a teleological one. A starting point for this is the concept of “unbecoming” proposed by Fraiman (1993), which challenges the idea of development as a process leading to fulfillment. However, *Burnt Sugar* adds a new dimension to the concept of unbecoming by highlighting that it is not just a disruption of normal development but a necessary one in a world in which the future cannot solve the past.

Such a reconceptualization both resonates with and adds complexity to the idea of “memory as ethical labor” as proposed in Jani’s (2025) work. The process of recollection in the novel is not depicted as a passive process, as the story reveals the active engagement with the process of recollection as a form of “unverifiable” narrative, as discussed in the study of literary memory (Milevski & Wetenkamp, 2022). In this regard, the process of development is “ethical” in nature, as the development is measured not in terms of the finality achieved, but in terms of the engagement with the process itself. The lack of closure, therefore, is not a narrative weakness, but an epistemological choice.

C. *Epistemic Instability and Subalternity: Speaking Within Constraint*

This shift in temporality immediately raises the question of epistemic authority and its relation to Spivak’s (1988) notion of subalternity. Spivak’s argument is not that the subaltern is voiceless, but rather that the very conditions of speaking within dominant epistemic frameworks make the subaltern voice unrecognizable. In the case of *Burnt Sugar*, the subaltern position of Antara is complex in the sense that she speaks at length, but her voice is unstable and grounded in unverifiable memory, contradictory motherhood, and cultural inscription. The fact that Antara is “manglik” (Doshi, 2020, p. 15) is a good case in point. While it does not silence her, it positions her within an existing discursive field that makes her undesirable. However, the dementia of her mother adds a new dimension of epistemic instability to the narrative, one that aligns with the disability-oriented literary theory of the instability of the narrative voice in the context of dementia (Mullaney, 2024; Vermeulen, 2022).

Under these circumstances, Spivak’s question must be reformulated. The question is no longer whether the subaltern can speak but how speaking is enacted in a context in which epistemic verification is not possible. Antara’s voice is situated in a space of epistemic constraint in which speaking and doubt are inextricably linked. This is in line with narratological theories of unreliable narrators in which the uncertain status of knowledge is inherent and not coincidental (Booth, 1983; Phelan, 2005). The novel therefore expands Spivak’s ideas by demonstrating that epistemic exclusion is still in effect in a context in which speaking is present, transforming it into a process of negotiation.

D. *Relationality Without Resolution: Revising the Third Space*

The above analysis of epistemic instability serves as a basis for reconsidering relationality in light of Bhabha’s (2004) notion of third space. However, in the case of *Burnt Sugar*, relationality subverts this model by being characterized by ambivalence instead of hybridity.

Antara’s claim that she cannot be “the daughter of a conventional mother” and that she cannot “be like my mother’s identity” (Doshi, 2020, p. 156) is a case in point. The relationship between a mother and daughter adds complexity to this already unstable relationship, thereby producing a relationality that cannot be resolved. This is in line with recent feminist theories of maternal ambivalence that have highlighted the simultaneous presence of hostility and benevolence as being structurally inherent (Williamson, 2023; Henriksson et al., 2023).

In the context of Indian literature, such ambivalence is highlighted as a major thematic concern (Karmakar, 2022; Routray et al., 2025). Rather than resolving such ambivalence, the novel maintains it as a condition of ethical concern. Thus, relationality is negotiated as a process that is always in a state of ambiguity, effectively modifying Bhabha's framework by shifting the condition of the third space from one of synthesis to one of ambiguity.

E. *Narrative as Development Without Recognition*

This new concept of relationality consequently results in a reevaluation of the concept of development, especially in relation to recognition. In the classical concept of the bildungsroman, development is affirmed in the context of recognition. *Burnt Sugar* challenges this concept of development and redefines it as the ability to narrate in the absence of recognition.

In the context of Boehmer's (2009) concept of narrative resistance, the novel consequently repositions the concept of storytelling as the primary site of agency. The recognition of the fact that Antara's mother will not "see" her (Doshi, 2020, p. 247) consequently represents a critical shift in the concept of development. The concept of recognition is thus displaced by a redefined notion of development grounded in narrative endurance. This shift in the concept of development is thus consistent with the narratological concept of unreliability and fragmentation as a viable and not a limiting concept of narrativity (Phelan, 2005; Lugea, 2022). Narrative is consequently positioned as a concept of endurance.

F. *Situating the Novel: Beyond the Postcolonial Framework*

The foregoing sections have shown how *Burnt Sugar* not only challenges genre but also questions the effectiveness of more general theoretical frameworks. While clearly engaging with colonial legacies, the novel is equally shaped by processes of globalization and transnational literary circulation.

Recent developments in postcolonial scholarship have increasingly raised doubts about whether traditional frameworks can adequately account for such conditions (Gikandi, 2001; Siskind, 2010). More recent interventions call for a rethinking of postcolonial critique in order to address global literary dynamics and evolving forms of subjectivity (Goyal, 2022). In this sense, *Burnt Sugar* may be seen as a form of writing that transcends the descriptive limits of classical postcolonial analysis.

By contrast, earlier works by Desai (2000) and Deshpande (1988) still exhibit some elements of a narrative resolution. *Burnt Sugar*, however, takes fragmentation to a degree that makes resolution structurally impossible.

This may be seen as a general development in Indian Anglophone fiction that increasingly conceives subjectivities in terms of a dialogue between global and local forces. The absence of caste also positions *Burnt Sugar* in a particular socio-economic and literary context and points to a need to complement classical postcolonial analysis with more recent critical perspectives.

G. *Ethical Complexity: Dementia, Disability, and Narrative Responsibility*

The last section also examines the ethical aspects of *Burnt Sugar's* depiction of dementia and maternal ambivalence. Disability studies have also indicated that cognitive disorders such as dementia should be seen as both material and representational, and this evokes important discussions about narrative authority and ethics (Ward & Sandberg, 2023; Schou-Juul et al., 2026).

Antara's suspicion that her mother's forgetting could be "convenient" (Doshi, 2020, p. 92) raises questions about how to balance the need to attribute agency with the recognition of impairment. Studies of literature about dementia have highlighted this ambiguity as a key feature of ethical representation, where there is a risk of over-attributing agency or, conversely, eliminating it altogether (Vermeulen, 2023; Mullaney, 2024).

Similarly, the portrayal of maternal ambivalence in the novel cannot be reduced to a simplistic analysis. Instead of idealizing or demonizing the maternal character, the novel portrays a complex ambivalence in line with the arguments of feminist theorists who analyze motherhood as inherently contradictory (Williamson, 2023). Tara is portrayed as accountable and yet ultimately unknowable, while the story of Antara is an attempt to engage with a complex and ambiguous relationship.

Such ethical complexity is arguably one of the most important contributions that the novel makes. This is especially because it challenges readers to think about the possibilities and limitations of narrative knowledge in a world affected by trauma, disease, and relationship ambiguity.

III. CONCLUSION

In order to read *Burnt Sugar* as a theory of development and not merely a generic innovation, one must engage in a fundamental reconsideration of the bildungsroman and its reception as a form. The text demonstrates that postcolonial female development is not a lessened or fractured form of European development theory but a different model of development entirely. When the promise of social integration is withdrawn from development theory, development does not disappear but is conceptualized as survival, narrative, and ethics in a state of instability and partial understanding. Development is no longer a question of coherence or resolution but of being in relation to others and maintaining narrative meaning in a state of uncertainty.

This study proposes three related theoretical interventions that go beyond the particular text under examination. First, with regard to the theory of the bildungsroman, this study proposes that, rather than a set of conventions, the genre is best understood as a problem-space, where the very idea of development is put to question. *Burnt Sugar* proves that one can think through development as a concept through its absence, thereby making failure a site of productive critical thought. Second, with regard to postcolonial feminist theory, this study demonstrates that maternal ambivalence is not simply a thematic concern, but rather a structural condition that undermines autonomous subjectivity. The mother-daughter relationship is thus presented as a site where relationality is sustained rather than overcome, emphasizing a form of subjectivity defined by contradictions rather than coherence. Third, with regard to narrative theory, *Burnt Sugar* rethinks unreliability and fragmentation as representational strategies rather than failures. These narrative strategies enable one to think through Spivak's concept of epistemic exclusion from within its own parameters, through its speaking subject, who is not quite a subject.

Aside from these contributions, the analysis also suggests several avenues for potential exploration in the realm of theory. One such area could lie in the comparative exploration of dementia in postcolonial works as not merely a metaphor for the common forgetting of the past but as an actual phenomenon, that reconfigures notions of memory, truth, and ethical relations. Another potential area could involve the development of the concept of development without recognition in relation to other postcolonial female bildungsromane that also refuse integration as a form of narrative conclusion.

The limitations of the term "postcolonial" in the discussion of the complexities of twenty-first-century Indian Anglophone fiction suggest the need for an expansion of critical approaches that take into account the globalized literary marketplace, the neoliberal subject, and the class dynamics of English-language authorship. These approaches collectively suggest a broader reconfiguration of literary theory in favor of more context-sensitive and malleable analytical vocabularies.

Ultimately, what *Burnt Sugar* challenges us to think about is not simply a matter of genre or national literary tradition. Rather, it is what it means to think about development in a world in which becoming is no longer possible, in which memory is not stable, and in which recognition is not forthcoming. If the classic form of the bildungsroman attempted to account for how the individual becomes a subject in a world that is socially coherent, then Doshi's novel challenges us to think about how one becomes a subject in a world in which coherence is impossible and resolution is foreclosed. In thinking about this question, the postcolonial female bildungsroman does not simply challenge or adapt an existing genre but also challenges the conceptual grounds for thinking about development itself.

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