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AMERICA IS IN THE HEART AS A COLONIAL-IMMIGRANT NOVEL ENGAGING THE BILDUNGSROMAN

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Abstract

Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, the first Filipino American novel, has held a special place as one of the first of Asian American literary writing, but its craft has also been questioned because of the plainness of its language and its repetitious, tortuous plot. Through an evaluation and analysis of the novel as a Bildungsroman, this paper argues that the seeming failure of the plot to provide a coherent narrative of development is in itself the literary manifestation of the frustrating socio-economic realities in which the first Filipinos in America lived. Bulosan's novel is therefore not so much a failed Bildungsroman but a twentieth-century Filipino American engagement of a nineteenth-century form in which the encounter not only uncovers the myth of universality of the form but also asserts the self-representation of the heretofore unrepresented. As such, *America is in the Heart* needs to be read not only as a record of but as an involvement in the Filipino American struggle in the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords

Filipino American literature, narrative, postcolonial novel

About the Author

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Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* is both an easy read and a tedious read. On the one hand, the language is very simple, almost childlike. On the other hand, the narrative movement seems repetitious and circular. For example, Allos gets sick four times in the first seven of forty-nine chapters and then falls sick again in Chapter Thirty-One; and in each of these times, someone assists Allos to read books. Part Two is filled with a multitude of farms that Allos works in and leaves. Perhaps, the largest circular movement begins in Chapter Thirteen and ends in the concluding chapter. In Chapter Thirteen, Allos gains his first employment in the United States at an Alaskan cannery and in Chapter Forty-nine, as he ends his story, he is once again on his way to work in Alaska. The circular movements in the narrative could, on the first read, leave the conclusion seemingly unprepared for, and hence rather unsatisfying. Because of this, the final assertion of

assimilation into American Society seems rather abrupt and questionable. However, upon further examination of the novel, an underlying forward movement in the narrative may be gleaned beneath the superficial circular movements. This study seeks to reevaluate the narrative of Bulosan's novel to distinguish the forward movement. Taking the novel's subtitle "A Personal History" as a cue, this study explores the narrative as a *bildungsroman* and examines how the novel both participates in and resists this genre.

The *bildungsroman* includes variances that make it sometimes difficult to judge a novel as either belonging or not to the genre. Bernard Selinger identifies the issue of eventual integration or alienation as one sort of variance of *bildungsroman* novels. Those which conclude with perpetual alienation of the subject may be called *antibildungsroman*, a deliberate attempt to ridicule "the notion that an (essentially alienated) individual could achieve any sense of identity in a society that is no longer meaningful" (Selinger 39-40). Another issue of variance is the centrality of the individual or society in the novel. Selinger notes that there are critics who subscribe to the *bildungsroman* as primarily concerning the individual protagonist's inner life and psychological development while others insist that it is the society rather than the individual that is central; and then there are those who suggest that it is equally about both the individual and the society (40).

Despite these and other variances characterizing the *bildungsroman* and the disagreement of critics arising from them, Selinger notes that it is clear enough that the origin of the genre, the point at which it is recognized to have come to existence, is Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795) and that the point of origin of current criticism and theorization on this genre, whether by agreement or opposition, is Jerome Buckley's 1974 definition in *Seasons of Youth: The "Bildungsroman" from Dickens to Golding*.

Jerome Buckley outlines the general outline of a *bildungsroman* narrative as follows:

A child of sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile to his creative instincts or flights of fancy, antagonistic to his ambitions, and quite impervious to the new ideas he has gained from unprescribed reading. His first schooling, even if not totally inadequate, may be frustrating insofar as it may suggest options not available to him in his present setting. He therefore, sometimes at a quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city (in the English novels, usually London). There his real "education" begins, not only his preparations for a career but also—and often more

importantly – his direct experience of urban life. The latter involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity. His initiation complete, he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice. (17-8)

Buckley adds that “the growing child as he appears in these novels more often than not will be orphaned or at least fatherless” (19). Buckley recognizes that not every *bildungsroman* novel must have all the elements, but he insists that none “ignores more than two or three of the principal elements—childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (18).

Most of these elements are contained in *America is in the Heart*. The first part of the novel is devoted to the childhood of Allos. It narrates the departure of Allos and his brothers—Leon, Luciano, Amado, and Macario—from their hometown to big cities and, eventually for three of these brothers, to America. Although accomplished, though in a fragmented and unsystematic manner, Allos educates himself through reading until he is surprised himself when he realizes that he can write. The experience of alienation is also markedly present in Allos’s life both in the Philippines and in the United States. In the United States, Allos discovers and embraces a socialist philosophy and then eventually finds his way to a vocation in writing. As a narrative of the development of a writer, *America is in the Heart* can in fact be identified as a specific kind of *bildungsroman* called the *künstlerroman*, or “a tale of the orientation of an artist” (Buckley 13).

Lisa Lowe concedes that Bulosan’s novel may be read as a *bildungsroman* “to the degree that it narrates the protagonist’s development from the uncertainty, locality, and impotence of ‘youth’ to the definition, mobility, and potency of ‘maturity’” (45). Lowe contends that such a reading privileges “a telos of development that closes off the most interesting conflicts and indeterminacies in the text” and reduces the novel to an approximation, a low-rate mimicry of a nineteenth-century European genre. Lowe suggests that the novel could instead be read in a manner that privileges the novel’s discontinuities with the genre, thereby revealing how it questions the notions of “development, synthesis, and identity” (45).

Lowe cites Allos’s remembrance of his brother’s speech to show that the novel

presents two opposing visions of America: “the national fiction of democratic nation-state without sorrow or suffering, and a nation whose members barely survive owing to exclusion from the nation-state” (47). Lowe sees the unevenness of American society suggested in the speech as being maintained in the end:

The novel ends with the repetition of yet another departure and relocation, framed as symptomatic of a continuing inequality between powerful agribusiness capital and immigrant labor, rather than with settlement, permanence, or resolution. It is an uneven, divided notion of America that concludes the novel, rather than a naturalized unification of those unevennesses and divisions. Thus, America is in the Heart does not ‘develop’ the narrating subject’s identification with a uniform American nation. (47)

By emphasizing the repetition of relocation and continuing inequality, Lowe’s reading denies a successful assimilation of the protagonist to the American nation. The reading casts the novel’s conclusion under a dim light but only accounts for the first section of the concluding chapter. The ending Lowe gives appears quite contrary to the brightness of the actual last sentences of the novel:

I glanced out of the window again to look at the broad land I had dreamed so much about, only to discover with astonishment that the American earth was like a huge heart unfolding warmly to receive me. I felt it spreading through my being, warming me with its glowing reality. It came to me that no man—no one at all—could destroy my faith in America again. It was something that had grown out of my defeats and successes, something shaped by my struggles for a place in this vast land, digging my hands into the rich soil here and there, catching a freight to the north and to the south, seeking free meals in dingy gambling houses, reading a book that opened up worlds of heroic thoughts. It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my brothers in America and my family in the Philippines—something that grew out of our desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, ever. (327)

These last sentences are filled with such optimism that it cannot be so easily reconciled with Lowe's reading. Is it possible to account for this optimistic conclusion without refuting Lowe's reading that keeps the conflicts and indeterminacies present?

Such a self-contradicting concluding chapter is but one of the many idiosyncracies of Bulosan's novel. A consideration of those other unusual if not disturbing features of the novel may well lead to a fuller understanding of the conclusion. Perhaps the first notable disturbing feature of the novel is the dual voices of the narrator. The first voice is a childlike voice that tells the personal history of Allos. The second voice is an almost academic voice providing historical information and social analyses of the society the protagonist lives in. The second voice intervenes infrequently, though extensively in a few occasions, and comes in when the narrator wants to explain the social background of personal events. As such, the second voice is present *to set the stage*, increasing the significance of the personal events.

However, the society that the second voice textually represents increasingly becomes more than just a social setting. In Chapter Eight, Allos says,

But the revolt at Tayug made me aware of the circumscribed life of the peasants through my brother Luciano, who explained its significance to me. I was determined to leave that environment and all its crushing forces, and if I were successful in escaping unscathed, I would go back someday to understand what it meant to be born of the peasantry. I would go back because I was a part of it, because I could not really escape from it no matter where I went or what became of me. I would go back to give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in my life. (62)

Society, or the environment as Allos calls it, with all its "crushing forces," is itself that which attacks Allos and his family and that which makes his life miserable. It is the society, and in the case of the quotation above the Philippine colonial society, that the protagonist desires to escape from. The society thus gains a central presence in the novel as the explicit antagonist. The main conflict of the novel is between Allos and the Philippine colonial society; then, later, the American exclusionist society. If *bildungsroman* novels vary according to the centrality of the individual psychological on the one extreme and the social structural on the other, Bulosan's novel clearly places both at its center with each acting as the protagonist and the antagonist.

Essentially related to the dual voices in Bulosan's novel is its most annoying feature of being repetitious. Martin Joseph Ponce describes the text's mobility narrative as "disorganized and 'unmappable'" (53) which has prompted Sau-ling Wong to ask, "why ...

it had kept a place of honor in the Asian American canon" (136). Indeed the novel is riddled with an endless list of forced relocations, identical troublesome gambling houses, cycles of temporary economic success followed by failure, similar tragic miscegenous marriages, undifferentiable incidents of beatings and police abuse, recurrent sickness, and untraceable meetings and separations of Allos and his brothers.

The multiple repetitions of incidents give the impression of a circular narrative movement that confuses and tires the reader. This feature of the novel can easily be mistaken as evidence for questioning its aesthetic quality. However, another salient feature of the novel is its extreme subtlety. A clear example of this extreme subtlety is the story of Mary. After meeting Mary on the bus, Allos takes her to their apartment where she does housework for their house companions. The narrator then says,

And then my brother Amado, who had not worked as he had promised ... began bringing suspicious characters into the apartment. Mary was still with us, but she withdrew into her room. Then one day she disappeared without a word of farewell. When I came upon her months later ... she clutched me and wept. (303)

Out of these two sentences of seemingly unrelated events, the narrator suggests in extreme subtlety how Mary was prostituted by Amado, the fact of which is confirmed only by the word "purity" in the succeeding sentence: "The whole world could not contain my thoughts and emotions, losing one so delicate and molded into purity out of our hope for a better America" (303).

It is with special attention to Bulosan's extreme subtlety that the circular narrative movement must be interpreted. Bulosan gives sufficient clues on how to interpret the circular feature of his narrative. In the already quoted passage from Chapter Eight, he says that he would go back to his hometown eventually "to give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in my life" (62). In Chapter Thirty-eight, speaking of the men in the labor movement, Allos says, "It was comforting to know that these men too were stirred by the social strangulation of our people" (169). Then, speaking of Nick who has been caring for him in his sickness, he says in Chapter Forty-four, "But he knew too that it was not only the disease that was weakening me, but also the black frustration that wrapped my life" (299). Through these words and through the circular narrative movement, Bulosan characterizes Allos's relationship with society as an experience of being thwarted and strangled, a black frustration that wrapped his life. All his efforts to rise above poverty, to gain knowledge, and to have human affection are foiled by society's forces. In colonial

Philippines, the courts, the middle class, absentee landlordism, the church, and even the public school system that promised emancipation, all conspire to keep him and his family confined to peasant life even as they keep on moving from Mangusmana to Binalonan, to various nearby towns, to Baguio and abroad. In exclusionist America, the cops, the farmers, the anti-miscegenation laws, the civil service, the women, but also the Chinese, the veteran, opportunistic Filipinos, and the criminal underworld, all conspire to keep him and his fellow immigrant workers down. Unable to move up, Allos and his people move around in circles on the same plane. Thus the circularity of the narrative movement must be interpreted as both metaphor and a realist narrative description of the plight of the colonial peasant and the immigrant worker in America.

While the circular narrative movement underscores society's oppression, it also reveals the perseverance of the desire of Allos and his people for a better life and their determination to take action to improve their lot. It is their unending desire for upward movement that keeps them trying and that keeps the narrative moving in circles. The circular narrative movement is therefore a trope for both social immobility and the enduring desire for social transformation.

Furthermore, the colonial, class and racial struggles Allos faces informs the *bildungsroman* thematics of the novel. The same social forces perpetrating social immobility prevent Allos from journeying into his manhood. In Chapter Nine, Allos makes the conventional departure of the *bildungsroman*. "I am leaving now, Father," he says one day (63). And though his parents try to hold him back because he is too young, he goes to Baguio. In Baguio, he meets Miss Mary Strandon, a librarian, for whom he works as a houseboy and through whom he gains access to books. A neighbor also begins to teach him English. After a couple of years, he makes the *bildungsroman*esque return to his hometown and declares "I had come back to manhood, here in my native village" (76). Or so he thought, for soon enough he is running away from Mangusmana again, for fear of getting prematurely married to a girl he danced with. Eventually, it becomes clear to Allos that neither a better station in life nor manhood are accessible to him in colonial Philippines and so he leaves for the United States.

According to Jerome Buckley's master narrative of a *bildungsroman*, there should be "at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, [that will demand] that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values" (18). This element of the *bildungsroman* is perhaps the most aberrant in Bulosan's novel. Although there is a debasing sexual encounter with a prostitute in Santa Maria, there seems to be no exalting sexual encounter or love affair that eventually leads Allos to manhood. It is not because

Allos is never attracted to women, nor is it because he does not fall in love. He stares at the film director's wife's naked body (141), smells the sweetness of Miriam (213), goes on a drinking binge because of Miriam's death (219), feels a slight tug in his heart for Dora (224), sympathizes with Alice Odell (230), writes vehement letters to Eileen Odell (235), begins to touch Teresa's face (250), and lights a match in the dark to look at Mary's face (301). But Allos never reports having a relationship with any of these white women. Instead, he makes himself sexually harmless to them, assuming the role of a child or a pet for them.

The white women themselves infantilize him. Miriam explains what she is doing with Allos in these words, "I would be happier if I had something to care for—even if it were only a dog or a cat. But it doesn't really matter which it is: a dog or a cat" (212). Eventually, it becomes Allos. The Odell sisters do the same. They provide for his education through books and take care of him in his sickness. Mary keeps house for him. Thus, through an infantilizing process the white women and Allos himself are mutually complicit with what David Eng calls the racial castration of Asian Americans in which associations between sexual and racial difference are fossilized so that to be Asian American means to be sexually castrated (1-2). The curious thing about Allos is that while his brothers and other immigrant acquaintances still go after white women despite the punishment many of them have suffered from white men, Allos very willingly submits to the prohibition.

That Allos's castration is not only socially enforced but also self-imposed is clearer in his relations to non-white women. While there may be no social sanctions in relating with non-white women, Allos still refuses to get involved with them. He runs away from Mangusmana when the girl he danced with comes to his house demanding marriage. In Lingayen, he runs away from the boarding house after he brings a baby he found in the schoolyard to his landlady. His reason for the self-castration is explained in Chapter Twelve where he says,

I went to Binalonan to say good-bye to Luciano. His wife had just given birth to another baby. I knew that he would have a child every year. I knew that in ten years he would be so burdened with responsibilities that he would want to lie down and die. I was glad that I was free from the life he was living. When I had finally settled myself in the bus, I looked down and saw my brother's pitiful eyes. (89)

Allos thus associates having a wife and children with the assurance of a miserable life. He suggests the same sentiments about having a family and its attendant poverty when he waves goodbye to Leon on the way to Manila. In Allos's mind, the woman is a

figure of entrapment, entrapment in the social forces that have kept him and his family in their peasant existence. Allos's castration was therefore self-imposed, a defense against the social forces that meant to oppress him whether as a peasant in colonial Philippines or as an immigrant worker in exclusionist America.

Because Allos's sexual maturation process has been subsumed in his conflict with society, his story as a *bildungsroman* takes an aberrant route that could very well dispel the claim that his story belongs to the genre at all. Instead of a sexual conquest, Allos embarks on a social conquest. He begins in Part Three of the novel by organizing unions. Eventually, his social conquest takes the form of writing. His sexual passage is displaced onto an authorial passage. Thus, after Miriam, Allos's attractions are displaced onto writing. He says about Dora Travers:

Dora sat in a corner, her back to the wall. In a little while she fell sound asleep. I felt a slight tug at my heart. I watched her still face.... The next morning I sat in my brother's room and started to write a poem, remembering Dora Travers and how she slept.... I was glad. I felt inspired. Yes, there was music in me, and it was stirring to be born. I wrote far into the night, subsisting on coffee and bread. I did not stop to analyse why my thoughts and feelings found expression in poetry. It was enough that I was creating ... I wrote fifteen poems in one sitting ... Then I knew surely that I had become a new man. I could fight the world now with my mind, not merely my hands. My weapon could not be taken away from me anymore. I had an even chance to survive the brutalities around me. (224)

Allos's attraction to Dora Travers thus precipitates his writing by which he experiences his fecundity and by which he could fight society. His writing, he says *makes him a new man*.

After Dora leaves for Russia and Allos is forcibly confined in the county hospital, he writes about Eileen his regular visitor,

I created for myself an illusion of understanding with Eileen, and in consequence, I yearned for her and the world she represented, the water rushed down the eaves calling her name. I told her these things in poems and my mind became afire ... When I became restless, I wrote to her. Every day the words poured out of my pen. (235)

The very displacement of Allos's sexual desire thus moves him into writing; and it is in that writing that he finds the weapon with which to fight the brutalities of society.

Accompanying Allos's writing is his reading spree. With the help of Eileen and others, he reads extensively trying to understand people, societies, and the world.

His reading and writing become his weapon, his way of meeting the world head on. Thus he writes,

I became fascinated by three young American writers.... I was irresistibly drawn by their contemporaneity, their realism and youth. In Fast, I caught a glimpse of the mainsprings of American democracy in the armies of George Washington; but in Stuart, I felt the quality and depth of men's lives in their attachment to each other and to the common earth that contains them. I felt a kinship with Shaw, whose bitterness and oblique humor are traceable to a feeling of isolation in a society where he is an unwilling heir to bourgeois taste and prejudice.

I was intellectually stimulated again—and I wanted to discuss problems which had been bothering me ... I felt like striking my invisible foe. Then I began to write. (305)

Allos thus began to write. At first, magazines in Manila took notice of him and he starts publishing there. He feels that "the time had come ... for [him] to utilize [his] experiences in written form. [He] had something to live for now, and to fight the world with; and [he] was no longer afraid of the past" (306). Soon after, Allos gets his first book published. It would have been a fine mark of his final arrival to manhood if not for Amado's girl who starts tearing it up. But Amado does give the final recognition of Allos arrival. He grabs the book from the girl and hits her for tearing it up; and, in his farewell letter, he recognizes that Allos's volume will contribute something to the world and that, although he doesn't understand all that Allos is doing, he knows that it is for the good of all.

Thus, through Allos's reading and writing, the society that was master to Allos is now being mastered by Allos. Through his reading, Allos masters the society, and through his writing, Allos acts to change that society. This comes about only by his perseverance through all the brutalities that society had set on him and through all those years that society made him go around in circles. This is the "something" that grew out of his difficulties. As Allos returns to Alaska at the end of the novel, he is very much aware that society had yet to be transformed; but he is now armed to fight for that transformation.

The novel thus ends with all the indeterminacies and discontinuities Lowe laments are smoothed over by a *bildungsroman* reading, and yet a development has indeed occurred in Allos, hence the optimistic ending. The conclusion is an optimistic hope, not so much celebrating America as it is, but its promise which has yet to come to “final fulfillment” (327).

In its participation in the *bildungsroman* genre, Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart* almost faithfully follows Buckley’s suggested master narrative of the genre. However, in its discontinuities with that master narrative, namely the necessity of displacement of Allos’s sexual desire, Bulosan’s novel deftly distinguishes the social forces that make it impossible for a colonial-immigrant subject’s story to be told faithfully following a nineteenth-century bourgeois literary form. This necessary aberration of Bulosan’s *bildungsroman* exposes the fact that the literary form itself is political. It unmasks the *bildungsroman*’s valuation of “development, synthesis, and identity” (Lowe 45) as complicit with society’s tendency towards uniformity and conformity. Finally, Bulosan’s novel requires a reconfiguration of the genre for it concludes with neither assimilation of the *bildungsroman* nor complete alienation of the *antibildungsroman*. Rather, it concludes with engagement in which the protagonist self-consciously stands in, and at the same time stands against, society. As Bulosan’s protagonist engages American society’s illusion of inclusion, his novel engages the *bildungsroman* genre’s illusion of final conclusion and completion.

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