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THE ROLE OF TRAUMA
IN RAWI HAGE'S *DE NIRO'S GAME*
AS A POSTCOLONIAL *BILDUNGSROMAN*
BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis is trauma in Rawi Hage's novel *De Niro's Game*. The aim of the thesis is to explore the characteristics that make Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* a postcolonial *Bildungsroman* and to compare the characteristics of the novel to the characteristics of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* demonstrating the significance of trauma in postcolonial *Bildungsroman* and in Hage's novel.

The thesis consists of the introduction, literature review, empirical part and conclusion.

Introduction summarizes the plot and introduces the topic. Literature review is divided into four parts: historical and political background of Lebanese Civil War, overview of the articles on *De Niro's Game,* development and features of the genre and the concept of trauma.

Empirical part discusses the features that classify *De Niro's Game* as a *Bildungsroman* and the features that place it in the postcolonial branch of the genre and demonstrate the role of trauma in the postcolonial *Bildungsroman De Niro's Game*.

The conclusion summarizes the core chapters.

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Introduction

"I was on the second floor, and I saw him, so I rushed and took the sniper gun from Kamil and shot between his legs. He was running with his pants down.

You did not kill him?

No. No. We promised each other that when this war ends we will have a drink."

(Hage 2006:77)

De Niro's Game by Rawi Hage, a Canadian author with Lebanese background, powerfully demonstrates to the readers how absurd, traumatizing and intense the everyday life in a warzone is. The novel is partly based on the real historical events during the civil war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, including the Shaba and Shatila massacre. The book addresses various political issues such as the opposing sides in the conflict and Lebanon's relations with France.

De Niro's Game is a novel about friendship and personal development of two teenage boys, Bassam and George, in the difficult circumstances of the Lebanese civil war. Growing up in a gruesome reality, traumatic events and lack of proper role models all have an effect on identity development and the line between the protagonist's identity and his reactions to post traumatic stress is thin. The title of the novel is from a movie about Vietnam War – *The Deer Hunter* with Robert De Niro, significant to the protagonist Bassam because of the scene about Russian roulette. The title refers to the protagonist's friend George, nicknamed De Niro. The book consists of three parts: Roma, Beirut, and Paris. Roma is the dream destination of the protagonist and also a symbolic place representing death, Beirut is where he is growing up and Paris is the place he ends up in after escaping Lebanon. The book has an open ending, leaving Bassam's story unfinished.

Bassam and George are childhood friends who grow up together in the middle of the civil war in Lebanon. During the course of the war their paths start to drift apart and the friendship loses its importance. Nevertheless George affects Bassam greatly and his influences continue to play a great role in the course of Bassam's life even after George's death. As Bassam and George are old enough they start to invent illegal schemes for income and that ties them closer together than Bassam wants. While Bassam has firmly decided to leave Beirut and start his life somewhere else, preferably in Rome, George is determined to stay and fight on the Christian side in Lebanon. George is trying to influence Bassam to join the militia but Bassam resists it. Bassam's mother and father die in the bombings of Beirut, George's mother has died of cancer and he has never met his father, who is a French diplomat (later the reader learns that his father has also died). Bassam's girlfriend Rana starts dating George while Bassam has a rough time after his mother's death. And the relationship of the former friends comes to a point where George deliberately sets up Bassam resulting in Bassam's arrest for a robbery and murder that George himself had committed. Bassam is tortured in prison. Over time George becomes profoundly involved in the militia and addicted to drugs.

The culmination of friends drifting apart coincides with a real historical event, the Sabra and Shatila massacre (killing of Palestinians and Lebanese muslims by Christian Lebanese militia in 1982. The massacre shocked Lebanon and the world), that was considered an act of revenge for the assasination of a newly elected Lebanese president. George participated in the massacre in the ranks of militia and Bassam was involved in the assassination, by helping his communist uncle. So they had ended up on opposing sides. Hage has used the massacre as the central piece of the story, it served the purpose to show how dehumanized George had become.

After the massacre George comes to bring Bassam to his leaders in militia for helping

with the assasination. As he catches Bassam while he is about to leave the country he forces him to listen to his story about the massacre. Giving Bassam in the hands of militia would mean a sure death for Bassam and George shows a final sign of their friendship offering Bassam a chance of fleeing by forcing him to play a game of Russian Roulette that George loses. After burying his friend, Bassam manages to catch a ship to France where he meets George's half-sister Rhea. Rhea is interested in learning about his brother and so is Roland, an agent of an intelligence agency in Beirut's Christian side, but Bassam hides the fact that George is dead. Instead he tells them that he is in Beirut and works for the militia. Rhea and Bassam have a short affair and in the end Bassam admits to Rhea what has happened to George. The story ends with Bassam buying a train ticket to Roma while the intelligence is after him.

Hage employs an elegant style full of contradictions, showing the signs of trauma with simple wording in dialogues and complicated descriptive passages that are at the same time brutal, even lowly, straight to the point and figurative, analytical and sophisticated. Hage has an ability to switch between different ways of writing and keep the transitions smooth. His lengthy descriptions start in a random everyday situation in a warzone and end up giving an overview about political and historical background or commenting on social norms, often getting lyrical, poetical, always full of imagination. Dialogues are inside the narrative, without any quotation marks or words that imply to the mood of the speaker. The writer uses three languages in his book: English, French and Arabic and switches between them.

Hage himself does not place his novel in any single category, with the explanation that "categories oftentimes homogenize and simplify literary texts /…/ I am disturbed when ambiguous, simplistic, or monolithic definitions are attached to my novels." (R. Hage in an interview with R. Sakr 2011). Even though Hage's multilayered novel can not be restricted in a single category, it is an outstanding example of a story about the development of an identity

in the middle of Lebanese Civil War, suggesting that it can be read as a *Bildungsroman,* more precisely as a postcolonial *Bildungsroman* and in this thesis I am going to explore this layer of *De Niro's Game*.

The main key terms of the research are trauma, post traumatic stress disorder and postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. The definitions of the key terms according to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* are as follows: trauma – a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury; post traumatic stress – a psychological reaction occurring after experiencing a highly stressing event (such as wartime combat, physical violence, or a natural disaster) that is usually characterized by depression, anxiety, flashbacks, recurrent nightmares, and avoidance of reminders of the event; *Bildungsroman* – a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character. *Bildungsroman* is the combination of two German words: "Bildung, meaning 'education,' and Roman, meaning ''novel.' Fittingly, a '*Bildungsroman*' is a novel that deals with the formative years of the main character - in particular, his or her psychological development and moral education. The *Bildungsroman* usually ends on a positive note with the hero's foolish mistakes and painful disappointments over and a life of usefulness ahead" (Merriam-Webster online dictionary 2020).

Various research papers written about this novel deal with the effects of trauma on masculinity and gender roles (Georgis 2011, Mostafa 2011, Gerkul 2015), the dehumanizing effect of war, escapism and revenge (Rahman 2009, Nasser 2016, Libin 2013). While in some book-reviews (Koning 2008, Parker 2007, Sharif 2017) *De Niro's Game* has been referred to as a coming-of-age story, the novel has not been studied from the perspective of being a *Bildungsroman*.

There are many definitions of *Bildungsroman* – the original meaning of *Bildungsroman* originates from 19th century Germany, and it was restricted to German

culture only. The definitions range from wide to very narrow, the narrow ones excluding literature with a female protagonist and non-German literature and the wider ones including all novels about moral and psychological development of a young protagonist not considering the sex or nationality. *Bildungsroman* as a genre has been redefined since it was first introduced by Karl Morgenstern in 1803 (Kontje 1993: 15). The genre is in constant development and there is no consensus on its characteristics. Nevertheless, most of the critics agree upon some representative features.

"Bildung" is about maturation and psychological development in a certain cultural and political setting. Rawi Hage's protagonist Bassam is placed in very difficult political circumstances and is maturing in the middle of the Civil War in Lebanon. In addition, he is shaped by the political and social situation as well as the culture and gender roles in Lebanon. Significantly, the psychological development of the protagonist is affected by trauma and Hage has several ways of depicting it. Namely, he employs escapism and imagination for demonstrating the effect of trauma. While Rawi Hage's novel has several characteristics that place it in the genre of *Bildungsroman* there are also several features that categorize it into the postcolonial branch of the genre. Various articles discuss the trauma in *De Niro's Game* but do not approach it as a characteristic of postcolonial *Bildungsroman* and I will fill that gap in the previous research with this thesis.

The aim of this thesis is to explore Hage's novel as a *Bildungsroman* and the aspect of trauma in it. To fulfil the aim, the literature review will first provide a historical background to *De Niro's Game* and an overview of the novel's reception. Then the development and the features of the genre of *Bildungsroman* will be discussed to identify its postcolonial branch, and finally, the concept of trauma will be discussed.

The empirical part of the thesis will analyse *De Niro's Game* first as a *Bildungsroman* and then concentrate on the features that classify it to the postcolonial branch of the genre. I

will argue that the specific features of postcolonial *Bildungsroman* have a strong connection to trauma and show the significance of trauma in *De Niro's Game*. As the novel is set in the Middle-East during the Lebanese Civil War, the circumstances are different from those in a classical *Bildungsroman*. Considering that, I will argue that *De Niro's Game* is a postcolonial variant of the *Bildungsroman* and that trauma is the central aspect of the novel.

1. The Historical and Political Background, the Reception of the Novel, and the Theoretical Underpinnings of the Genre of *Bildungsroman* and the concept of Trauma

The aim of this study is to compare the characteristics of the novel to the characteristics of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* and to demonstrate the significance of trauma in this genre. As *De Niro's Game* is a relatively recent novel on Lebanese Civil War, there are a limited number of studies written on the novel and none of them has concentrated on analysing the novel as a postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. The literature review will concentrate on following aspects: brief overview of Lebanon's political situation and recent history, mapping the articles written on the novel, gaining background knowledge on development of the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and its features, mapping the features of postcolonial *Bildungsroman* in order to compare them to the original Bildungsroman and literature on trauma theory to provide necessary background to show the importance of trauma in postcolonial *Bildungsroman*.

1.1 The Historical and Political Background to De Niro's Game

The events of the novel are partially based on real historical events. Knowledge on this background is necessary to study the development of the characters. To understand the times of French colonisation and its impact on the territory I am going to use a study by Joseph Chamie (1976/77) "The Lebanese Civil War: An Investigation Into the Causes" where

he outlines the forming of the Republic of Lebanon and the reasons behind political, religious and economical problems.

The territory of Lebanon was a part of Ottoman empire and after the defeat of Turks in WWI the French gained control of Mount Lebanon. To gain more political and economic control the French annexed Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, Tyre and Bekaa plain that were the Muslim regions and called it the State of Greater Lebanon. As Mount Lebanon was mainly Maronite Christian, being joined with Muslim territories religious composition changed drastically. It resulted in a slight Christian majority who was in good relations with French government. The Muslims who were forced to join Lebanon became resentful and hostile. That was the source of conflicts (Chamie 1976/77).

For an overview of different non-official sides in the Civil War I am using a study by Ann Marie Baylouny (2014) "Born violent: Armed political parties and non-state governance in Lebanon's civil war". Baylouny's study is about Lebanese Civil War and the formation of "non state violent actors" – the militia. The term militia in Arab countries refers to an armed political party that does not govern legally. In addition it can mean a non-political organized and armed group. Baylouny notes that there were more than a hundred groups that took part in the Civil War between 1975 and 1990 and these groups blended together or split from another bigger group over time. In general they were divided in two sides in the war. One group were the leftists whose aim was to change the pre-war situation. They preferred a secular political system because the contemporary system was not good for their interests as it pre- determined their political position and left them in a slight minority. The leftists were also Arab nationalists and included the Palestinians. On the opposing side were the rightists, the Phalange armed group that joined the Lebanese Forces consisted of right-wing political parties. They were mostly Christians, pro-French, had economically liberal values and wanted to maintain the status quo in the beginning of the Civil War (Baylouny 2014). A high

number of Christians in an Arab country and clashes between different economic and religious groups provides a fertile ground for conflicts.

1.2 Overview of the Reception of *De Niro's Game*

The development of the characters has a trauma background and it is strongly affected by war and terror situations. Thus, escapism; loss of identity, dehumanisation and problems with letting go of the past have a significant role in the novel and several studies concentrate on that subject. Safaa Abdel Nasser (2016) analyses the dehumanizing effect that war has on people in his study "Shape-shifting as a quest for liberation, empowerment and justice: metamorphosis and therianthropy in Rawi Hage's novels" and points out the presence of escapism and loss of identity in *De Niro's Game*. Mark Libin (2013) concentrates also on the psychological side, his study is focused on how the protagonist is unable to let go of the past in "Marking Territory: Rawi Hage's Novels and the Challenge to Postcolonial Ethics". Najat Rahman's (2009) study "Apocalyptic Narrative Recalls and the Human: *Rawi Hage's De Niro's Game*" addresses the problematic apocalyptic discourses that "imply that the security of those under occupation or attack /…/ does not matter" and thereby is also left out of public discourses. The study shows how novels like *De Niro's Game* have the power to challenge the discourses of public and state security that neglect the safety of civilians.

Several articles on *De Niro's Game* have been written in the field of gender studies. Dina Georgis and Dalia Said Mostafa both elaborate on masculinity and its fragility. Georgis (2011) concentrates on the political conflicts and racial differences affecting the development of masculinity in her study "Masculinities and the Aesthetics of Love: Reading Terrorism in *De Niro's Game* and *Paradise Now*"**.** Mostafa's research (2011) "Journeying through a Discourse of Violence: Elias Khoury's Yalo and Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*" on the other

hand is about how violence experienced in war is affecting masculinity and sexuality and also on its effect on their identity development. Lisa Gerkul's (2015) article "Guns And Tender Cotton. Feminized States in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game"* focuses on the role of women in the novel, she points out that "women serve entirely as props in a narrative" (Gerkul 2015: 67).

While the articles about *De Niro's Game* mentioned above are exploring various aspects of the novel none of them has analysed the book as a postmodern *Bildungsroman*. There are several articles about trauma and the psychological side of the development of the characters that help to see the struggle of teenagers growing up in a war situation. The coming-of-age itself is difficult, but in the case of *De Niro's Game* it is mixed with trauma, post-traumatic stress and lack of good choices in a society where there are no guarantees – and that makes *De Niro's Game* as a postcolonial *Bildungsroman* set in unconventional conditions for psychological and moral growth an interesting topic to study.

1.3. *Bildungsroman*: The Development and the Features of the Genre

Bildungsroman has a history of more than 200 years and it has been redefined ever since it was first introduced by Karl Morgenstern in 1803. The term is of German origin, many scholars use it in an untranslated form and in italics. In English, it is often called a novel of formation, coming-of-age novel or novel of development. The genre is constantly developing and there is no consensus on its characteristics. Nevertheless, there are some special characteristics that most of the critics agree upon. Several studies have labeled *Bildungsroman* as a "phantom" genre, arguing that its characteristics are questionable and not agreed upon. Both Redfield (1996) and Sammons (in Kontje 1993: ix) come to a conclusion that "*Bildungsroman* is missing". Ormsbee (2020 para. 1) is suggesting as well that by the

narrow definition, the genre might disappear completely: "Given a wide enough definition, the genre can conceivably become coterminous with the novel itself; given a narrow enough definition it threatens to disappear entirely."

Tobias Boes (2006, 2012) and Todd Kontje (1993) give an impressive overview of the genre's development and criticism throughout its history. Tobias Boes (2006)' article "Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends" focuses on the studies about *Bildungsroman* in the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. His book (2012) "Formative Fictions. Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism and the *Bildungsroman " concentrates* on the 19th and the 20th century and is mainly about the genre's connections to modern nationalism, but also the cosmopolitan elements in the novels. For analysing *De Niro's Game* as a *Bildungsroman* I use Todd Kontje's (1993) The German *Bildungsroman*: History of a National Genre. In his book Kontje brings out criticism throughout different periods and outlines the development and constant redefining of the genre. It will help to compare and contrast the characteristics of the original concept of *Bildungsroman* that was introduced by Karl Morgenstern in 1803 to its modern derivations.

There are different sides that critics take in the debate on the *Bildungsroman*: while some believe that the term *Bildungsroman* should only be used for 19th century German literature, others prefer to use it more widely, including different nations, eras and protagonists.

In the beginning of the genre's history, in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century *Bildungsroman* was German, the story was about a young, white, middle-class protagonist searching for his place in life. The focus was on a single protagonist and his development and the readers get an overview of society and contemporary conditions. At first the themes were about religion, gradually the topics became more secular (Röder in Kontje 1993: 51). The environment and its effects on the individual became an important factor in the process of

development (Kontje 1993: 2).

The criticism on characteristics and form of the *Bildungsroman* in the eighteenth century was mostly based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre published in 1796 and contemporary ideas of Bildung (Kontje 1993: ix) . It depicted the idea of a predetermined path that a person had to take in order to become mature (Kontje 1993: 1).

Until recently *Bildungsroman* was still considered to belong to Western culture. In 1969 Jost used the term *Bildungsroman* applying it to different national literatures (Kontje 1993: 52). In the end of the 20th century *Bildungsroman* went through a drastic change − stories with female, homosexual protagonist from different social classes are included and later also decolonization is added as a suitable topic for a *Bildungsroman* While the protagonist was first "psychologically unproblematic individual" as Heinrich Dreisman (in Kontje 1993: 30) explains, later the novelist "no longer portray healthy typical figures but concentrate on the psychopathology of the abnormal individual /.../".

Boes (2006: 231, 239) claims in his study that the traditional definition of *Bildungsroman* broadened rapidly in 1980s and 1990s when post-colonial, minority and feminist studies played a significant role in including "global and fragmentary narratives of transformation and rebellion" and it is no longer restricted to a specific place.

Bildungsroman and postcolonial *Bildungsroman* have several characteristics in common*:* they are both about maturation and development of a character in a certain political and cultural setting, both are about nationality, have a single hero, there is a conflict and lack of understanding between generations, the actions take place in the age of changes and uncertainties and they both help to understand the events. In the end of the *Bildungsroman* the protagonist has grown up and achieved something, for example married and started employment, has become a normal boring citizen with ordinary life.

A distinctive feature in *Bildungsroman* is the conflict between generations and also

the element of changing world as argued by Moretti (in Kontje 1993: 83): "individuals can no longer expect to mature into the stable world of their parents", and "that the evolving protagonists of the new Bildungsroman do more than reflect the uncertainties of the age; they also help to shape an understanding of the events that produced them and to which they respond".

Buckley (in Kontje 1993: 70) regards the years of childhood and early adolescence as the time period of a traditional Bildungsroman. The protagonist's development consists of "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (Buckley in Kontje 1993: 70). There is a difference in the postcolonial branch of the genre, as it usually covers a shorter period of time (Lima in Hoagland 2019: 282).

Hegel (in Kontje 1993: 24) points out that in the end of the Bildungsroman the protagonist has grown up and achieved something, for example married and started employment, has become a normal boring citizen with ordinary life. In *De Niro's Game* has an open ending leaving the protagonist far from settling down with his faith uncertain for the reader. It does not fit the original characteristics of an original *Bildungsroman.*

Ericka Hoagland's book *Postcolonializing the Bildungsroman: A Study of the Evolution of a Genre.* (2006) and Hoagland's chapter "The Postcolonial *Bildungsroman.*" In S. Graham's "A History of the *Bildungsroman"* (2019) are the basis for characteristics of this newly evolved genre in this thesis. Hoagland (2006:4) demonstrates how "decolonization, sovereignty, trauma, war and identity /…/ become integral parts of the genre's 'rewriting'". As Hoagland's study points out, the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* is distinctive not only for its concern with colonialism but also for being critical about the society, for its lack of closure and for "hybridity, ambivalence and trauma" and the timespan of the events is relatively short (Hoagland 2019: 279). Lima (in Hoagland 2019: 282) explains the lack of closure with the

fact that the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* is often about death and homlessness, so the protagonist cannot offer the closure and building of the family that are so common in the European *Bildungsroman*.

Ormsbee (2020) "Battle for the Bildungsroman: Protagonist and National Allegory" deals with nationalist topics in traditional *Bildungsroman* and also discusses the singleness of the protagonist. He shows how the protagonist at the same time "emerges as the lone victor of the struggle to be perceived as a protagonist /.../" and becomes "a symbolic vehicle for national values" (Ormsbee 2020: para. 25). He uses Beddow's definition that emphasizes the importance of 'the development of a single hero or heroine' in a *Bildungsroman* and concentrates on the word 'single' (Ormsbee 2020: para. 2). He argues that 'single' can mean both: that there is only one protagonist and that the protagonist is single, not in a relationship or being isolated from the society. Ormsbee (2020: par 6) also raises the question how the reader identifies the protagonist, in his opinion a valid protagonist is: somebody whom the author has chosen to name the book after or telling the story through the eyes and with the words of a certain character, that is a first-person narrator.

Fredric Jameson (in Boes 2006: 234) states that literary genres are "experimental constructs" that are changing as the new texts affect them. Swales (in Kontje 1993: 73) argues that "each new member of a biological species does not change the species as a whole, whereas each work of literature adds something new to its genre". So the wider the circle has become the more rapidly it has been expanding adding new characteristics and including more and more novels. The history of *Bildungsroman* as a genre has been colourful and much argued about by critics. As *Bildungsroman* is about youth – full of life, rebellious, in constant change so are also its characteristics for critics.

1.4. The Concept of Trauma

Cathy Caruth's (1996 and 1995) "Unclaimed experience. Trauma, Narrative and History" and "Trauma: Explorations in Memory" help to gain a better understanding of representation of trauma and post traumatic stress in literature. Caruth (1995) discusses Freud's trauma theory and explains the importance of literature in the debate on the concept of trauma. Caruth (1995: 4-5) is exploring "how trauma unsettles us and forces to rethink our notions of experience and of communication /.../ in literature as well as in psychoanalytic theory" involving leading scientists from various disciplines in the discussion. "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess".

There are different definitions of post-traumatic stress disorder, Caruth defines it as follows: "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event." (Caruth 1995: 4). Caruth explains how trauma is not only connected to "destruction" but also to "survival":

> "As such, PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence and to be the most destructive psychic disorder. I will argue in what follows that trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience." (Caruth 1996: 57-58).

Anne Whitehead's (2004) book *Trauma Fiction* is exploring the connections of trauma and fiction. According to Whitehead (2004: 86) repetition is a device for expressing

trauma in literature: "Repetition mimics the effects of trauma for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression."

2. The Features of *Bildungsroman* and the Aspect of Trauma in *De Niro's Game*

The first chapter of the empirical part of this thesis concentrates on the features that the postcolonial version of *Bildungsroman* has in common with the traditional *Bildungsroman* and points them out in *De Niro's Game*. The second chapter of the empirical part focuses on the features of the postcolonial version of *Bildungsroman* and presents its characteristics in *De Niro's Game*. The features of the postcolonial version of *Bildungsroman* are related to trauma in the novel and thus the thesis argues that trauma has a significant role in Hage's postcolonial *Bildungsroman De Niro's Game*.

2.1. *De Niro's Game* as a Bildungsroman

The history of the criticism of *Bildungsroman* is complicated. As Sammons (in Kontje 1993: ix) explains it: "If we begin with a fixed definition of the genre and set off in search of appropriate examples, we may well come to conclusion that the *Bildungsroman* is missing". Nevertheless there are several traits that classify *De Niro's Game* in the genre of *Bildungsroman* and in this chapter I will observe those characteristics.

Bildungsroman is about maturation and development of a character in a certain political and cultural setting and *De Niro's Game* fills that criterion with the protagonist maturing in times tense with difficult political situations and in the middle of a diverse culture of a postcolonial country.

Bildungsroman is traditionally connected to nationality. Ormsbee (2020: par 11) comments on the thin line between being a protagonist or a carrier of national values in a

Bildungsroman: "/.../ that is precisely the fate that awaits the typical Bildungsroman protagonist, once it becomes self-evident in the minds of readers that the character *is to be read as* the symbolic container for national values". In Hage's novel the connection between the genre and the nationality is recognisable. As in the postcolonial branch of the genre the nationality is full of ambivalence and hybridity and is affected by changes and delocalisation. The nation has contradictory feelings about the colonial powers and decolonisation. Georgis (2011) does not write about *De Niro's Game* as a *Bildungsroman* in her article, nevertheless she brings out the hybridity and ambivalence in national feelings. Georgis (2011: 143) sees Bassam as the representative of Lebanon's ambivalence in the novel – "Lebanon that is tired of its own melancholic attachment and reaching for something else /.../ George perhaps exemplifies the destructive features of melancholic devotion to homeland".

The singleness of the protagonist that Beddow's definition suggests is dubious in Hage's novel. On the one hand Hage has named his novel after a friend of the protagonist letting the reader know how Bassam's friend George is in many ways affecting most of the decisions that Bassam makes. But on the other hand Bassam is the one who is telling the story and eventually it is about his life. There are different opinions about the protagonist in *De Niro's Game*: while some of the critics see Bassam as the protagonist (Gerkul 2015, Rahman 2009), Georgis, Mostafa and Nasser believe that Bassam and George are both protagonists (Georgis 2011, Nasser 2016, Mostafa 2011) at the same time Abdelfattah and Khelif consider George as the real protagonist (Abdelfattah 2012 and Khelif 2020). Remarkably there is no discussion on the topic of the protagonist in the articles, but the identities of the protagonist are just stated by the authors.

A distinctive feature in *Bildungsroman* is the conflict between generations and also the element of the changing world. In *De Niro's Game* the protagonist Bassam is a vivid example as he avoids understanding his parents, letting the reader know whenever possible

that he does not approve of the way of life they were leading, calling his father a gambler and alcoholic. Bassam is also not expressing any sorrow over losing his father and mother. "Dark, it was dark, dark like my parents' tomb. Fuck him, I thought, at least I will not be buried in the same place as they!" (Hage 2006: 232). The old times of his parents growing up will never return, after the Civil War the country is not going to be the same. The parents with their traditional male and female roles with mother always cooking and father drinking and gambling remain distant. At the same time his attitude towards women shows that Bassam is affected by the role models of his family and society – "Bassam's interactions with women exclusively happen if and when he has an opportunity to express his masculine bravado" (Gerkul 2015: 67).

Bassam is a reflection of the era and affected by the ongoing civil war. War and traumas are the driving force in his actions and affect his every decision. He is a "thief" and a "thug" and so are all the other young men surrounding him: "We are all thieves in this war, I said."; "War is for thugs. Motorcycles are also for thugs, and for longhaired teenagers like us, with guns under our bellies, and stolen gas in our tanks, and no particular place to go" (Hage 2006: 12). All the adventures that Bassam faces are related to the civil war and help the reader to understand the circumstances and the reasons behind actions and multilayered political conflicts with Bassam giving emotionless overview of the events.

In *De Niro's Game* the third part Paris represents the end of Bassam's childhood and puts him in an environment where he has to be a grownup and settle down. Bassam, with his family dead, arrives in Paris where he has no friends or relatives. On the one hand he is free and has no responsibilities but on the other hand it is the end of his teenage life. As the story is left open-ended, the reader never finds out what happens to Bassam after he buys a train ticket to Rome and if or how Bassam actually settles down after his adventures. However the reader can be certain that Bassam achieved his goal, that was getting out of the warzone. "I

just wanted to see something else besides that doomed city. I just wanted to leave" (Hage 2006: 406). It is a sidestep from the original characteristics to the *Bildungsroman,* but according to Hoagland it is very characteristic to the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* depicting "a broken, or even impossible, maturation process" (Hoagland 2019: 274).

2.2. The Postcolonial Features of *Bildungsroman* and the The Significance of Trauma in *De Niro's Game*

In this chapter I will focus on the main elements in postcolonial *Bildungsroman* that differentiate it from the traditional *Bildungsroman*, which I argue are related to trauma. *De Niro's Game* fits the genre perfectly with escapism, dehumanization and imagination. Hage has a way of depicting all that in a vivid and clear cut manner. His writing with switching between different languages and styles gives an erratic feeling and the flights of imagination fracture the narrative and take the reader to unexpected places. For the reader the difference between Bassam's identity and his reaction to trauma is often hard to tell, as his development is overshadowed by traumatic events. "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 1995: 5).

I will demonstrate that characteristics of postcolonial *Bildungsroman* in *De Niro's Game* can be traced back to trauma: concern with colonialism, being critical about the society, lack of closure, hybridity and ambivalence, the short timespan of the events (Hoagland 2019: 279). Taking nicknames from Western culture in order to change the identity is also a common phenomenon in postcolonial *Bildungsroman* (Hoagland 2019: 283).

Concern with colonialism is evident in *De Niro's Game.* Colonialism has left traces to Lebanese society and is also the reason behind traumatic events that have shaken the

Lebanese. The Civil War broke out between the pro-French Christian population and muslims that did not support the pro-western government. The novel has myriad allusions to colonial times that are often represented in critical manner. As Lebanon had been decolonized there are still numerous connections to France. French people are often considered rich and more attractive: "Got married to that French teacher. They all want to get married to Frenchmen" (Hage 2006: 76). Before being colonized by France, Lebanon was part of Ottoman empire and Hage is mentioning that in his text as well: "/.../ and a photo of me smiling to the Armenian photographer, looking at his beloved 4 x 5 camera that his father had brought from Russia and carried through the Syrian Desert while the young Turks slaughtered his cousins on doorsteps /.../" (Hage 2006: 54).

Hage's writing is critical about the society in general. Hage does not take any sides but shows the shortcomings and in a neutral way, at the same time leaving the reader feeling sadness about the traumatized society.

"I heard that communists like to share things, so here is your chance to be part of an egalitarian society. Do the right thing and make your communist uncle proud." (Hage 2006: 227). "George's mother had become pregnant by a French man who had left the country, and that she had decided to keep the baby in spite of all the social taboos, the hardship she had to face, the church's excommunication threats, and the isolation she faced from her family and society" (Hage 2006: 324). "Inside their houses, the impoverished women carefully, economically, dripped water from red plastic buckets over their brown skins in ancient Turkish bathtubs, washing away the dust, the smells, the baklava-thin crust, the vicious morning gossip over tiny coffee cups, the poverty of their husbands, the sweat under their unshaven armpits" (Hage 2006: 14). "The bombing had stopped, and women had come out from their holes to gather tender meat for their unemployed husbands to sink their nicotine-stained teeth into and seal their inflated bellies" (Hage 2006: 29-30). "I never discussed his family with him, I said. Some things are better left alone. In our society, these are sensitive things to talk about" (Hage 2006: 296).

The lack of closure and fragmented storyline (Hoagland 2019: 282) in *De Niro's Game* is explainable with war. As Bassam has no possibility to mature in a conventional manner his only goal in life at the time of the Civil War is to escape the country. That makes him make desperate decisions to get enough money for the trip and leaves him stranded alone in a foreign country suffering from symptoms of post-traumatic stress and having an unknown life ahead of him. He has to get accustomed to living in a time of peace and struggles with understanding that he is not in danger anymore.

Hybridity and ambivalence is present in postcolonial reality and also in Hage's novel with the society simultaneously looking up to and despising the colonizing powers as a result of clashes between different cultures. Hage uses three languages and switches between them in the middle of sentences as a sign of cultural hybridity.

Short timespan of the events in *De Niro's Game* is inevitable, as Bassam's daily life is full of action and the pace of the narrative is fast. *De Niro's Game* deals only with the early adolescence of the characters and leaves the childhood out entirely. As there are lots of stressful and traumatic situations in war the span of time in postcolonial writing is usually short. "This narrative choice serves to highlight the interrupted, erratic and fractured development of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* protagonist." (Hoagland 2019: 282).

The first characteristic element of the book referring to trauma, the title itself, as an aspect of the novel's peritext in the terms of Gerard Genette (Skare 2020: sect. 1), is very meaningful. De Niro is the nickname of Basssam's friend George. Only Bassam and George's aunt call him differently, everybody else uses the nickname. According to Hoagland (2019) taking a nickname for erasing their former identity is a common feature in war- and postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. It is also characteristic to choose a nickname from Western pop culture, usually the ones that refer to strength (Hoagland 2019: 283). The young characters

are in search of role models and the strength and power of the movie heroes is appealing, so with taking a nickname they also take on a new identity instead of the erased former identity and to escape reality. "Their alternative personalities are their means to challenge the dehumanizing, corruptive and corrosive effect of war /.../" (Nasser 2016). Rambo, the tormentor of Bassam, is another example of nicknames taken from Western movie heroes. The nicknames are accepted as the real names. Except in one occasion where a militiaman asks Bassam after hearing De Niro's name: "And what is your nickname? Al Pacino?" (Hage 2006: 58).

In addition to definable features of a postcolonial *Bildungsroman,* Hage's writing is rich with other implications to trauma. Many of his methods can be classified under "positive symptoms" and "negative symptoms" described by Freud in his studies on trauma (Freud in Caruth 1996: 130). Positive symptoms such as flashbacks and hallucinations (Caruth 1996: 130) occur in Paris after Bassam has escaped the country and negative symptoms like "numbing and avoidance of triggering stimuli" (Caruth 1996: 130) are evident throughout the text, expressed by the style of the narration and the flights of imagination that Bassam uses to free his mind and forget. In the coming paragraphs I will demonstrate the trauma in *De Niro's Game* on the level of peritext, character and narration.

The chapter headings of the book are meaningful. Hage has commented on the choice of the names of the chapters in an interview to Rita Sakr: "Paris evokes France's colonial relations with Lebanon /.../ Rome may signify a final destination or death." (Sakr. 2011).

The repetition of "Ten thousand" in the narration carries a feeling of obsession. It shows excess and at most places it refers to bombing in sentences like "Ten thousand bombs had landed" (Hage 2006: 10, 108), but occasionally also to cigarettes in "Ten thousand cigarettes had touched my lips" (Hage 2006: 26), killing in "We must have killed ten thousand of them." (Hage 2006: 259), and even kisses in "I laid ten thousand kisses on her

body, under a cascade of sweet falling bombs." (Hage 2006: 69). According to Whitehead (2004:86) repetition is commonly used to show trauma in narrative. Nasser (2016) has covered Hage's repetitive use of "ten thousand" in his study: "Hage uses a fragmented, distracting technique, with repetition of the refrain "ten thousand bombs" /.../ and the juxtaposition of contradictory life images /.../, to convey George and Bassam's psychological disintegration and hallucinatory undercurrent. (Nasser 2016: 4).

With escapism as a method for depicting trauma, Bassam's imagination is full of fantastic escapes from reality. At the times when the bombs are falling in Beirut he dreams of fantastic conversations: "Human flesh is not forbidden us dogs, those laws apply only to humans, the unshaven poodle said to me. I nodded and agreed, and walked on some more. I heard rifles and more bombs." (Hage 2006: 48). Or lets his mind wonder and tells the reader about his surroundings and the thoughts the surroundings evoke in him. The stream of consciousness in Hage's writing is often giving comments on historical, social and political situations:

> I climbed onto George's motorbike and sat behind him, and we drove down the main streets where bombs fell, where Saudi diplomats had once picked up French prostitutes, where ancient Greeks had danced, Romans had invaded, Persians had sharpened their swords, Mamluks had stolen the villagers' food, crusaders had eaten human flesh, and Turks had enslaved my grandmother. (Hage 2006: 12)

Dehumanization is used for showing the effect of mother's death on Bassam. "But I had no sadness to spare or parade. If anything, the death of my mother had liberated me. Now I would leave nothing behind. Her death had made me closer to birds and farther away from humans." (Hage 2006: 123) "Now I was a creature closer to dogs than to men." (Hage 2006: 124). And also to express George's horror after the massacre "Fifteen hundred lions positioned at the airport we were. Nothing would stop us, nothing. We moved like thunder toward the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, along the wide road through Ouzai." (Hage 2006: 261).

When Bassam is in Paris, far away from danger, as a sign of post traumatic stress he starts daydreaming about having an army and horses, fighting against an enemy in historical Paris, being a commander during revolution:

"I searched for a cigarette, but found that my box had been emptied last night by the aristocrats I had executed, many of whom had requested one last cigarette." (Hage 2006: 306) /.../ "I ordered my soldiers to clean up the war scene and to cease all fire, theft, and disturbance. I ordered them to go underground and fight the invading fascists. My soldiers rejoiced." (Hage 2006: 312) /.../ "Then I rushed down the stairs, jumped on my horse, and we galloped across the Parisian cobblestones while," (Hage 2006: 380) /.../ "My officers and I paced and smoked pipes. Some of my officers had their feet on the table, showing their boots. The campaign room was filled with smoke, and maps on the table that detailed flowing rivers, mountains, and long plains. We should attack soon, before your voyage to the new continent, comrade, one general with a droopy white moustache declared." (Hage 2006: 378).

Mark Libin (2013) elaborates further on Abdelfattah's (2012), Georgis' (2011), Rahman's (2009), Mostafa's (2011) articles and shows how *De Niro's Game* challenges "conventional representations of postcolonial trauma" and redefines "the postcolonial hospitality" showing the refugee as somebody who is not just a passive victim in wars and colonisation but rather as somebody who is not interested in settling down in peaceful West and continues to live the same way as he did in the past. By doing that contaminating, unsettling and invading the host country and marking "the territory, overwriting the city with his own fractured, violent signature" (Libin 2013). When in Paris Bassam still acts like he was in Beirut:

"In the dim moonlight, I watched a man's silhouette rushing down the stairs. When he faced me, I lowered my hat over my eyes and said, Bonsoir, in a muffled voice. As soon as he passed by me, I hit

him from behind. And before he had the chance to recover, I rushed toward him and gave him many blows from the whistling pipe in my hand" (Hage 2006:380).

Libin also demonstrates in his study how Bassam's behavior after escaping Beirut and arriving Paris seems at first a paranoid response to posttraumatic stress but later it lets the reader witness the West turning into "extension" of the conflicts in once colonized countries (Libin 2013) with Bassam still in danger and followed by Mossad agents.

One significant post-traumatic reaction is shown with first George forcing Bassam to listen to the traumatic story about the massacre of Shaba and Shatila and later Bassam forcing George's sister to listen to the same story with the addition of telling her about the death of George. "The choice to force someone to hear your trauma, in a diegetic way and not dramatized in a flashback technique, is a mechanism of self-defence to share the secret and the trauma with another one." (Abdelfattah 2012). "But the novel's thematization of storytelling suggests that narrative has the potential to heal even the gravest of psychic wounds inflicted by trauma" (Gerkul 2015).

Conclusion

De Niro's Game allows the reader to see behind the media coverage of the Middle East situation. The public discourse discusses mainly states and political situations without depicting everyday life in a warzone. Rawi Hage's novel takes no sides and does not focus on finding someone to blame, it plainly shows us the absurdity and the chaos of the war and also the trauma that it causes. As the development of an identity is already an interesting topic on its own, the postcolonial element makes it even more fascinating to study since it adds the complicated social and political background.

Postcolonial *Bildungsroman,* a branch that has evolved over time from the German genre, shows how far the genre has developed from its original concept. The new features serve the purpose of demonstrating the traumatic consequences of the colonial times through the process of following the protagonist's struggles in growing up.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review and empirical part. The introduction gives a brief overview of the novel and the genre of *Bildungsroman*. Literature review consists of four parts: the first part introduces the political situation and history of the Civil War in Lebanon, the second part concentrates on the reception of the novel, the third part is about history and characteristics of *Bildungsroman* and the last part is about trauma. In the first chapter of the empirical part the characteristics of *De Niro's Game* as a *Bildungsroman* are discussed. There are several features that *Bildungsroman* and its postcolonial derivation share: the story is about maturation and development of a character in a certain political and cultural setting, it is traditionally connected to nationality and has a single protagonist, there is a conflict between generations and also the element of the changing world, the protagonist is a reflection of his or her environment and helps the reader

to understand the situation. In the end of the *Bildungsroman* the protagonist has become a grown-up and achieved something in his life.

In the second chapter the specific features of the postcolonial version of the *Bildungsroman* are discussed and the centrality of trauma both in postcolonial *Bildungsroman* and *De Niro's Game* is pointed out. Based on studies on *Bildungsroman* by Kontje and Hoagland the empirical part demonstrates the ways in which postcolonial version differs from the traditional *Bildungsroman*: by its concern with colonialism, critical attitude towards the society, lack of closure, hybridity and ambivalence and the short timespan of the events. The empirical part also discusses trauma that is present in the novel on several levels: on the level peritext, character and narration and also has an important role in the genre.

The thesis shows how the qualities of postcolonial *Bildungsroman* are related to trauma and outlines the significance of trauma both in postcolonial *Bildungsroman* and in *De Niro's Game*. While the protagonist struggles for his ultimate goal to leave the country the narration is full of manifestations of trauma and post traumatic stress. Several of the features in the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* are the results of traumatic events and thus the thesis proved trauma being an essential part in *De Niro's Game* as a postcolonial *Bildungsroman*.

De Niro's Game, a novel with its multiple layers, makes an interesting topic to study. As the novel is quite recent, research in the future could further examine the connection of trauma and linguistic expression in *De Niro's Game* and the relation between trauma and the identity formation in *De Niro's Game*.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Kertu Valge
The Role of Trauma in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game As a* **Postcolonial** *Bildungsroman*
Trauma roll Rawi Hage teoses *De Niro Mäng* **analüüsituna postkoloniaalse**
arenguromaanina

Bakalaureusetöö
2021
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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida trauma rolli Rawi Hage teoses *De Niro Mäng* ja näidata trauma tähtsust postkoloniaalse arenguromaani tunnusena.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatusest, kirjanduse ülevaatest, kahest sisupeatükist ning kokkuvõttest.

Sissejuhatuses tutvustatakse romaani sisu, arenguromaani tunnuseid ning uurimisteemat.

Kirjanduse ülevaade kosneb neljast osast, kus käsitletakse ülevaatlikult Liibanoni kodusõja aegset poliitilist olukorda, tutvustatakse *De Niro Mängu* ainetel kirjutatud artikleid, arenguromaani ajalugu ja tunnuseid ning trauma kontseptsiooni.

Empiiriline osa koosneb kahest alapeatükist. Esimeses alapeatükis käsitletakse tunnuseid, mis paigutavad *De Niro Mängu* arenguromaani zanrisse, teises alapeatükis näidatakse trauma, kui tunnuse olulisust postkoloniaalses arenguromaanis ning analüüsitakse Rawi Hage trauma kujutamise meetodeid.

Märksõnad: Kanada kirjandus, trauma, arenguromaan, postkoloniaalne arenguromaan, Liibanoni kodusõda

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