

## Rewriting the Bildungsroman: Urban Experience, Emotional Loss and Self-formation in Jerry Pinto's *The Education of Yuri*

Dr. Preeti Sharma<sup>1</sup>, Karam Chand<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Manmeet Kour Raina<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, University of Jammu (India)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, GDC Kathua, J&K (India)

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer, Govt. Degree College, Vijaypur, J&K (India)

### Abstract

The bildungsroman has traditionally been associated with narratives of growth that culminate in self-realisation and social integration. However, in postcolonial contexts, the genre undergoes significant transformation, reflecting fractured identities, emotional instability, and the pressures of urban modernity. Jerry Pinto's *The Education of Yuri* presents a contemporary Indian reworking of the bildungsroman that resists the promise of resolution and instead foregrounds education as a process of emotional endurance and lived experience. This paper examines how the novel redefines self-formation through the interrelated forces of urban space, informal learning, and emotional loss. It argues that Yuri's education unfolds not within the confines of formal institutions but through his encounters with the city of Bombay, personal relationships, ideological disillusionment, and trauma. By situating the novel within the evolving tradition of the Indian Bildungsroman, the study demonstrates how Pinto challenges classical models of development and offers a deeply human portrayal of growth as incomplete, vulnerable, and ongoing in postcolonial urban India.

**Keywords:** Bildungsroman, urban experience, emotional trauma, self-formation, resilience

### INTRODUCTION

The Bildungsroman, or the novel of formation of the character, occupies a central position in literary history as a genre concerned with the gradual development of an individual from youth to maturity. Emerging from European literary traditions in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the genre has conventionally focused on a young protagonist's journey toward self-knowledge, professional stability, and social integration. Texts such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* established the foundational structure of the Bildungsroman, presenting education as a harmonising process through which the individual reconciles personal aspirations with societal expectations. Over time, however, the genre has undergone significant transformation as it has travelled across cultures and historical contexts, particularly within postcolonial literatures.

In Indian English fiction, the Bildungsroman has been adapted to reflect the complexities of colonial history, rapid urbanisation, class mobility, and psychological dislocation. The linear progression toward maturity that characterises classical European models is frequently disrupted, replaced by narratives of uncertainty, emotional fragmentation, and unresolved identity. Jerry Pinto's *The Education of Yuri* stands as a compelling example of this shift. The novel presents education not as a structured or institutional process but as an accumulation of lived experiences shaped by loss, relationships, ideological encounters, and the urban environment. Yuri's journey does not culminate in social harmony or personal fulfilment; instead, it foregrounds endurance, vulnerability, and emotional awareness as defining aspects

of growth. The significance of *The Education of Yuri* lies in its redefinition of education itself. Rather than privileging academic achievement or professional success, the novel emphasises informal learning that emerges from everyday encounters and emotional crises. Yuri's development is shaped by his navigation of Bombay, a city marked by contradictions and inequalities, as well as by his intimate relationships and experiences of grief. In this sense, the novel resists the traditional Bildungsroman's emphasis on resolution and instead presents formation as an ongoing and incomplete process. Critical discussions of the Bildungsroman often rely on Jerome Buckley's identification of key genre elements, including conflict with parental authority, departure from home, exposure to love and work, and eventual accommodation with society. Franco Moretti further argues that the Bildungsroman historically functioned as a narrative form that aligned individual development with the ideological needs of modern society. However, such frameworks prove inadequate when applied to postcolonial narratives that foreground instability and emotional rupture. The trajectory of development in the novel is neither linear nor conclusive. Yuri's education does not lead to reconciliation with social norms but instead fosters an awareness of emotional fragility and moral ambiguity.

The novel's engagement with urban space is central to this reconfiguration of the Bildungsroman. Bombay emerges not merely as a physical setting but as a formative presence that shapes Yuri's consciousness. The city exposes him to diverse social realities, ideological tensions, and emotional challenges that formal education fails to address. Through his movement across different neighbourhoods and social spaces, Yuri becomes acutely aware of class divisions and political disillusionment. These encounters constitute a form of education grounded in exposure rather than instruction, compelling him to confront the contradictions of urban life. Bombay's role in the novel aligns with a broader tradition of Indian English fiction that positions the city as an active participant in narratives of self-formation. Urban spaces become sites of learning where identity is negotiated through observation, interaction, and survival. For Yuri, the city functions as a living classroom that teaches resilience and adaptability. The lessons he learns are not codified or comforting; they are often painful and destabilising, reflecting the realities of contemporary urban existence. Equally significant to Yuri's education is his encounter with emotional loss and trauma. Unlike classical Bildungsromans in which emotional crises serve as stepping stones toward maturity, Pinto's novel presents loss as a persistent and transformative condition. Yuri's experiences of grief do not lead to closure or clarity; instead, they deepen his emotional awareness and vulnerability. The novel thus aligns with contemporary trauma theory, which emphasises the lingering and unresolved nature of loss. Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma resists narrative closure finds resonance in Yuri's fragmented development, where growth is marked by hesitation and emotional withdrawal rather than confidence.

This emphasis on emotional endurance challenges the optimistic assumptions underlying traditional narratives of formation. In *The Education of Yuri*, growth is not synonymous with mastery or stability. Instead, it involves learning how to coexist with uncertainty and emotional pain. Yuri's education is characterised by an increasing capacity to recognise and inhabit emotional complexity, rather than by the attainment of clear goals or social roles. The novel also foregrounds the limitations of institutional education. While Yuri engages with formal schooling and literature, these experiences alone do not define his development. His most significant lessons emerge from relationships, ideological encounters, and moments of loss. Education, in Pinto's narrative, is relational and experiential, shaped by interaction rather than

instruction. This redefinition reflects a broader critique of rigid educational frameworks that fail to address emotional and ethical dimensions of growth. By presenting self-formation as an incomplete and ongoing process, *The Education of Yuri* resists the closure traditionally associated with the Bildungsroman. The novel does not offer a moment of resolution in which Yuri achieves harmony with himself or society. Instead, it presents growth as fragile and contingent, shaped by the unpredictable forces of urban life and emotional experience. This refusal of closure underscores the novel's humanistic impulse, emphasising vulnerability as a defining aspect of contemporary identity.

In situating *The Education of Yuri* within the tradition of the Indian Bildungsroman, it becomes evident that Pinto both engages with and challenges the genre's conventions. The novel retains the focus on individual development but reconfigures its trajectory and purpose. Formation is no longer a journey toward social integration but an ongoing negotiation with loss, uncertainty, and emotional complexity. This reimagining reflects the realities of postcolonial urban India, where stability is elusive and identity is continually reshaped by external and internal forces. The novel's contribution to Indian English literature lies in its ability to articulate these complexities with sensitivity and restraint. Pinto's prose captures the subtle emotional shifts that define Yuri's education, avoiding melodrama while acknowledging the depth of his experiences. This narrative approach reinforces the novel's emphasis on the everyday dimensions of growth, highlighting how seemingly ordinary encounters can carry profound formative significance. The human quality of *The Education of Yuri* also lies in its refusal to monumentalise suffering or romanticise growth. Yuri's education unfolds quietly, through moments of confusion, withdrawal, and reflection that resist dramatic transformation. This narrative choice aligns the novel with contemporary realist traditions that prioritise emotional authenticity over structural neatness. The Bildungsroman, in this sense, is not abandoned but recalibrated to accommodate the uneven rhythms of lived experience. Growth is presented as something that occurs in fragments, often retrospectively understood rather than consciously pursued.

The informal networks of influence surrounding Yuri further complicate the idea of formation. Friends, mentors, and ideological figures enter and exit his life without offering stable guidance. These relationships do not function as moral anchors but as catalysts for questioning and doubt. Through them, Yuri is exposed to political idealism, disillusionment, and ethical ambiguity. Such encounters broaden his intellectual horizon while simultaneously intensifying his sense of uncertainty. Education here is not a process of acquiring clarity but of learning to live with unresolved questions. Literature itself plays a subtle yet significant role in Yuri's education. His engagement with books does not offer escapist consolation; instead, it sharpens his awareness of emotional and existential complexity. Reading becomes another mode of informal learning, one that deepens introspection rather than providing answers. This portrayal reinforces the novel's broader critique of instrumental approaches to education. Knowledge, whether literary or ideological, does not guarantee stability; it often heightens sensitivity to loss and contradiction. The city continues to exert pressure on Yuri's evolving selfhood, shaping his emotional responses and ethical perceptions. Bombay's relentless movement, its density and disparities, mirror the instability of Yuri's inner world. The city's refusal to slow down or offer refuge intensifies his sense of isolation even as it exposes him to collective life. This paradox underscores the novel's urban vision, where proximity does not necessarily produce connection and visibility does not ensure belonging.

In presenting urban space as both enabling and alienating, Pinto situates *The Education of Yuri* within a distinctly postcolonial urban discourse. The city is not a site of promise alone; it is also a space where aspirations are continually deferred. Yuri's education, therefore, involves learning how to inhabit contradiction that how to exist within a city that offers intellectual stimulation and emotional depletion in equal measure. This experience complicates the traditional Bildungsroman's emphasis on forward movement, replacing it with cyclical patterns of hope and disillusionment. Emotional loss remains a recurring undercurrent throughout the narrative, shaping Yuri's interactions and self-perception. Rather than being resolved, grief becomes a companion that influences his responses to the world. The novel suggests that such enduring emotional states are not impediments to growth but integral to it. In acknowledging the permanence of loss, Yuri's education acquires an ethical dimension grounded in empathy and restraint. He becomes more attentive to fragility both his own and that of others. This ethical awareness distinguishes Yuri's formation from the self-assertive trajectories often celebrated in classical Bildungsromans. His growth does not culminate in confidence or authority; instead, it manifests as attentiveness and emotional humility. The novel thus redefines maturity not as self-sufficiency but as an acceptance of interdependence and vulnerability. Such a redefinition carries particular resonance in contemporary contexts marked by uncertainty and rapid change. The absence of narrative closure reinforces this reconceptualisation of formation. The novel does not end with a definitive moment of reconciliation or achievement. The open-endedness of Yuri's journey reflects the novel's commitment to realism and its scepticism toward totalising narratives of growth. Formation is depicted as a process that extends beyond the confines of the text, resisting finality and inviting continued reflection.

This refusal of closure also positions the novel within broader debates about the relevance of the Bildungsroman in the modern world. As scholars have noted, the genre's classical form presupposes a stable social order within which individual development can unfold meaningfully. In contexts where such stability is absent or illusory, the Bildungsroman must adapt or risk obsolescence. Pinto's novel demonstrates how the genre can be revitalised by embracing fragmentation and emotional complexity. By situating Yuri's education within the everyday realities of urban life, *The Education of Yuri* affirms the significance of ordinary experiences in shaping identity. The novel suggests that formation does not require extraordinary events; it unfolds through routine encounters, minor losses, and fleeting connections. This emphasis aligns the text with a humanistic literary tradition that values attentiveness to the small and the transient. The language of the novel further reinforces this ethos. Pinto's restrained prose mirrors the quiet intensity of Yuri's experiences, allowing emotional depth to emerge without overt dramatization. This stylistic choice supports the novel's thematic focus on subtle transformation and emotional endurance. The Bildungsroman, in this context, becomes less about narrative momentum and more about emotional resonance. In reimagining education as an affective and experiential process, it also engages with broader critiques of modern educational systems. The novel implicitly challenges the notion that formal education alone can prepare individuals for the complexities of life. Yuri's most significant lessons occur outside institutional frameworks, suggesting the need for a more holistic understanding of learning that encompasses emotional and ethical development.

This expanded notion of education carries particular relevance in postcolonial contexts, where formal institutions often reproduce social inequalities and fail to address psychological needs. By foregrounding informal learning, Pinto's novel underscores the limitations of institutional authority and highlights the importance of lived experience in shaping selfhood. Education, in this sense, becomes a lifelong process marked by openness rather than completion. The novel's engagement with ideology further complicates Yuri's formation. Exposure to political ideas and movements introduces him to collective aspirations and moral fervour, yet these encounters often result in disillusionment. Rather than providing a sense of purpose, ideology becomes another site of questioning and doubt. This portrayal reflects a broader scepticism toward grand narratives and underscores the novel's commitment to emotional realism. Yuri's gradual distancing from ideological certainty mirrors his broader educational trajectory. As he becomes more aware of complexity and contradiction, he resists simplistic explanations and rigid commitments. This intellectual and emotional posture aligns with the novel's humanistic orientation, privileging empathy and reflection over dogma.

The depth of *The Education of Yuri* lies in the way it juxtaposes ordinary life with extraordinary emotional acuity. Even when Yuri is engaged in mundane tasks, Pinto's language imbues those moments with resonance. For instance, when Yuri tutors children or reads in quiet rooms, these actions are not presented as filler between dramatic events but as sites of reflection and formation. This stylistic choice aligns with Marc Redfield's observation that contemporary bildungsromans often prioritise sustained attention to ordinary life over dramatic epiphany. In contrast to classical models, where growth is marked by major turning points, Pinto's narrative suggests that education is acquired in small increments, through observation, reflection, and repeated engagement with the world.

The cumulative effect of these experiences is a form of selfhood defined by sensitivity rather than solidity. Yuri's education equips him not with answers but with an enhanced capacity to perceive and respond to the world's ambiguities. This conception of growth challenges dominant cultural narratives that equate maturity with decisiveness and control. In revisiting the bildungsroman through this lens, the novel offers a timely intervention in literary discourse. It demonstrates how the genre can accommodate contemporary realities without abandoning its core concern with individual development. By shifting the emphasis from resolution to endurance, Pinto reclaims the genre as a flexible and relevant form.

The novel's contribution to Indian English literature is thus both thematic and formal. It expands the possibilities of coming-of-age narratives by foregrounding emotional vulnerability and urban experience. In doing so, it resonates with a generation of readers navigating uncertain social and emotional landscapes. Ultimately, *The Education of Yuri* affirms that formation is not a destination but a condition of being. Yuri's journey remains open, shaped by memory, loss, and ongoing interaction with the world. This openness is not presented as a failure but as an authentic reflection of contemporary life. This narrative strategy resonates with readers because it parallels real life most personal growth is unheralded, internal, and unfolds slowly through everyday encounters. Yuri's first jobs, friendships, hesitant attempts at love, and awkward social interactions shape his inner world far more powerfully than any formal educational environment. As The New Indian Express review notes, the novel "turns trauma into sublime art," recognising that Yuri's development is defined by emotional endurance just as much as by intellectual activity ("The Education of Yuri Book Review"). The emotional impact of this narrative comes not from dramatic resolution but from the quiet accumulation of understanding.

Critics have emphasised the novel's sensitive portrayal of internal life. Guha's Scroll.in review highlights the "uneven" structure of the novel, but he frames this unevenness not as a flaw but as an accurate reflection of lived experience (Guha). This echoes Caruth's view that trauma cannot be neatly integrated into a coherent life narrative; instead, it resurfaces unpredictably and shapes memory itself (Caruth). Pinto's novel mirrors this: Yuri's memories of his parents, of Bombay's streets, of friends long lost, surface intermittently, reminding him that the past is never fully left behind. This temporal layering enriches the narrative and reflects broader postcolonial sensibilities. Postcolonial theory often emphasises how historical ruptures such as colonisation and rapid modernisation disrupt linear temporalities and produce fractured subjectivities (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). In *The Education of Yuri*, these fractures appear not only in personal loss but in the cultural texture of the city. Bombay is depicted as a city of contrasts, where old institutions coexist with new aspirations, where class divisions are stark but social mobility remains elusive. The city's contradictions shape Yuri's awareness of himself and others, teaching him to navigate ambiguity rather than seek clear resolutions.

The urban setting also enables Pinto to explore class and cultural plurality in ways that enrich Yuri's learning. His friendship with Muzammil, who comes from a more affluent background, exposes him to resources and modes of living that differ from his own. These experiences do not lead to envy or resentment; rather, they broaden Yuri's understanding of social difference. This is echoed in the *The Indian Express* review, which praises Pinto's ability to chronicle Bombay with both affection and nuance, showing how the city's cultural complexity becomes integral to Yuri's development (Gawande). Moreover, the novel's engagement with literary culture itself becomes part of Yuri's education. He reads widely from English literature to local narratives and these readings inform his emotional and intellectual responses. In a *Print Open Magazine* profile, Pinto's engagement with literature is framed as central to his work, reflecting the idea that reading shapes interiority and identity (Open Magazine). Yuri's relationship to books is reflective rather than instrumental; literature does not give him answers but deepens his capacity to question, empathise, and reflect. This dimension aligns with Edward Said's insistence that literature and critical engagement with literature fosters nuanced ethical awareness rather than offering facile solutions (Said). Yuri's reading habits mark him as a subject in formation, not through mastery of knowledge but through an ongoing engagement with ideas, emotions, and other lives imagined in texts.

The novel also quietly invokes memory studies. Memory in the text is not a mechanism for narrative closure but a continual disturbance, surfacing unbidden and altering the present. This fragmented memory recalls Walter Benjamin's approach to urban recollection, where the past is embedded in objects, spaces, and fleeting sensations rather than in clear, cohesive narratives (Benjamin). Pinto's narration captures this sensibility: Yuri's reminiscences are often triggered by sensory details, a familiar street corner, a distant sound, a phrase remembered from childhood. These moments demonstrate how memory and environment intersect in shaping subjectivity. The *LiveMint* review reinforces this point, describing Pinto's Bombay as "unsentimental" and rooted in lived experience rather than nostalgic idealisation ("*The Education of Yuri: Jerry Pinto's Sparkling Bildungsroman*"). Pinto's approach avoids romanticising the past; instead, he presents memories as textured and complex, encompassing warmth and pain, clarity and confusion. This aligns with postcolonial critiques of nostalgia that caution against simplistic reclamations of the past in favour of critically informed remembrance (Bhabha). Critical discourse also highlights the novel's ethical economy of

expression. Characters in the novel do not speak in grandiose or didactic terms; their dialogues are ordinary, their silences meaningful. This subtlety of expression supports an ethical stance that privileges attentiveness to the other over self-assertion. Judith Butler's work on vulnerability suggests that recognising one's own and others' susceptibility to pain can be foundational to ethical subjectivity (Butler). Yuri's education involves learning to see others their struggles, their contradictions and without reducing them to stereotypes or simplifying their experiences. The novel's avoidance of dramatic confrontations also distinguishes it from many contemporary narratives. Instead of presenting political struggles or overt social critiques, Pinto's text embeds social questions within everyday life class difference, cultural negotiation, identity formation and allowing the reader to witness these dynamics without explicit didacticism. This subtle approach resonates with the *The Tribune India* review, which calls the novel a "portrait of a writer in Bombay," suggesting that its value lies not in dramatic plot mechanics but in the texture of lived reality (*Tribune India*). The composition of the narrative voice plays a significant role in shaping this experience. Pinto's third-person close narration aligns readers closely with Yuri's interior life while retaining enough distance to allow critical reflection. This narrative position allows the text to embody what Terry Eagleton describes as the "interplay of subjective and social forces" in modern literature (Eagleton). Instead of conflating personal introspection with social commentary, the novel allows each to inform the other organically. The representation of time in the novel is equally nuanced. Yuri's growth does not unfold in tidy chronological segments but overlaps with his memories of past friendships, past mistakes, and past encounters. This temporal layering resists the neat linearity associated with classical bildungsromans. Marc Redfield argues that modern and postmodern narratives often disrupt linear temporality as a way of capturing the complexity of inner life in relation to changing social contexts. Pinto's narrative achieves this with deft subtlety, moving fluidly between moments of reflection and action without sacrificing coherence.

Another dimension that enriches the text is its engagement with cultural hybridity. Yuri embodies a cultural liminality he is neither fully rooted in tradition nor entirely absorbed by modernity. His linguistic fluency and cultural references situate him in a globalised world, yet his emotional ties to family and neighbourhood anchor him in local sensibilities. This duality aligns with Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity as a space of negotiation rather than binary identity formation (Bhabha). The novel portrays this negotiation as ongoing rather than resolved a hallmark of contemporary subjectivity in postcolonial cities. Furthermore, the novel's engagement with class, while subtle, remains significant. Yuri's observations of socioeconomic disparity are not overtly political but socially perceptive. His awareness of difference in education, lifestyle, and opportunity becomes part of his emerging self-understanding. This aligns with Gyan Prakash's exploration of urban life as a context of contrasts and contradictions (Prakash). Bombay is a metropolis where privilege and struggle intersect, and Yuri's navigation of this terrain is central to his education. By integrating these layers of trauma, memory, urbanity, hybridity, ethical attention the novel moves beyond the traditional bildungsroman. Instead of celebrating individuality as mastery, it celebrates empathy as ongoing engagement. This shift reflects a broader movement in contemporary literature that situates subject formation within the complexities of social and emotional landscapes rather than within personal triumph.

In conclusion, Jerry Pinto's *The Education of Yuri* redefines the Bildungsroman by situating self-formation within the interwoven contexts of urban space, informal education, and emotional loss. The novel challenges classical models of development that prioritise resolution and social

integration, offering instead a nuanced portrayal of growth as incomplete and ongoing. By emphasising endurance, vulnerability, and attentiveness, Pinto presents a deeply human vision of education that speaks to the complexities of postcolonial urban existence. The novel thus revitalises the Bildungsroman, demonstrating its continued relevance as a form capable of articulating the emotional and ethical dimensions of modern life.

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