



***Cobalt Blue* by Sachin Kundalkar as a Postmodern Bildungsroman: Exploring Identity, Growth, and Societal Tensions**

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ABSTRACT

Using the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler, Erik Erickson and Michel Foucault, this research paper examines Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* through the prism of the

Bildungsroman. The paper contends that Kundalkar's novel, with its dual narrative structure, tells a sophisticated and complex coming-of-age story. The paper's argument is that Kundalkar tells a complex and nuanced coming-of-age story in his narrative works. The enigmatic visitor acts as a spur for Tanay and Anuja's emotional and mental development as they each struggle with their own wants and society's expectations. The study looks at how the novel handles societal conformity, emotional development, and identity creation through an examination of their experiences.

Keywords – Bildungsroman, postmodern, identity, societal tensions

Introduction

Cobalt Blue is a Marathi novel by Sachin Kundalkar, written in 2006 and translated into English by Jerry Pinto in 2013. The novel tells the story of a family with five members: Baba, Aai, Aseem, Tanay, and Anuja. The family is not aware that Tanay is a gay boy. Their lives take a turn when a paying guest arrives without a name, address, caste, and family, introducing Tanay and Anuja to a world of love and heartbreak. Tanay's love and Anuja's romantic fascination are piqued by the mysterious and alluring PG. Tanay, who is a gay and the family is unaware about his identity, becomes romantically involved with a paying guest. His love is deeply ingrained in his life, causing him to reflect on his own identity and the impact of this relationship on himself. Meanwhile, Anuja, Tanay's sister, becomes more rebellious and confrontational, leaving her home with the paying guest, defying societal norms and expectations. The guest's true identity remains ambiguous, but his presence challenges their understanding of themselves and their roles within society.

In this paper, Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* is analysed as a postmodern Bildungsroman, emphasizing issues of societal tension, human development, and identity. Even though *Cobalt Blue* is commonly perceived as a tale of betrayal and grief, it may also be read as a Bildungsroman, a type of literature that tracks the protagonist's moral and psychological development of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood. This study examines Tanay's psychological and social growth as a means of identity-building, a central element of the Bildungsroman, drawing on theorists such as Erik Erikson, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, etc. This paper investigates how Indian narratives represent and subvert gender and sexuality-related societal norms. Specifically, it looks at how Kundalkar's novel challenges heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies through the protagonists' quest for self-discovery and identity formation.

Bildungsroman, sometimes known as a "coming-of-age" novel, is a literary genre that centers on the protagonist's moral, psychological, and personal development from childhood to adulthood. The name is derived from the German terms "Roman," which means novel, and "Bildung," which means instruction or formation. The protagonist of a Bildungsroman travels through a journey of self-discovery, learning from experiences of conflict, love, and grief, all of which have an impact on their identity and worldview. This genre traditionally depicts a young protagonist's quest to realize his or her true identity. It places a strong emphasis on how the protagonist's transition from childhood to maturity is aided by life experiences, setbacks, and

introspection as he moves through phases of self-discovery, love, betrayal, and ultimately self acceptance. Since *Cobalt Blue* tracks Tanay and Anuja's emotional and psychological growth, it adheres to the Bildungsroman format. Developing their identities, living up to social expectations, and pursuing their own goals provide difficulties for both characters. As Anuja challenges gender stereotypes and pursues independence, it shows her progress into maturity, while Tanay's exploration of his homosexuality, relationships, and internal conflicts creates a voyage of self-discovery.

In literary works, postmodernism is distinguished by the rejection of conventional narrative structures and the acceptance of subjective, fragmented viewpoints, ambiguity, and the dissolution of universal truths. *Cobalt Blue* by Sachin Kundalkar is a novel that explores postmodernism and the Bildungsroman tradition, creating a nuanced narrative about personal growth, identity, and the complexities of love and sexuality. The novel presents two distinct yet overlapping narratives—Tanay's and Anuja's—each telling their own version of events surrounding the same love affair. This fragmented narrative approach is a hallmark of postmodernism, where a single, unified truth is dismantled in favour of multiple, often conflicting perspectives. The novel explores the subjective nature of truth, with each character's reality being valid but incomplete. This emphasis on subjectivity aligns with postmodernism's rejection of absolute truth or singular narratives. The novel also deconstructs traditional concepts of identity and gender roles, challenging conventional notions of love, gender, and familial roles. Tanay's homosexuality is portrayed as an internal aspect of his character, while Anuja's experience with the same man exposes the rigid societal expectations placed on women in heterosexual relationships. *Cobalt Blue* blurs the boundaries between different genres and narrative forms, playing with these boundaries and refusing a clear categorization. The novel also critiques societal norms surrounding sexuality, love, and mental health, particularly in how it portrays the Joshi family's inability to understand Tanay's grief. This subtly undermines the authority of these institutions by showing how they fail to address the complexity of Tanay's identity. Incorporating a postmodern perspective in *Cobalt Blue* allows readers to explore how the novel fits within contemporary literary movements and the ongoing discussion of gender, sexuality, and identity in postcolonial India. By blending postmodern techniques with the Bildungsroman genre's focus on personal growth and maturation, *Cobalt Blue* creates a layered exploration of identity, sexuality, and emotional development, questioning the nature of what it means to grow up in a complex, modern world.

The present study examines Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* and its complex examination of gender and sexuality. The novel explores issues related to homosexual rights and sexuality, with the protagonist's journey breaking gendered norms. In a poignant tale that questions conventional notions of gender and sexual identity in Indian society, Kundalkar tells the stories of two siblings who fall in love with the same man. Instead of just providing a background, the novel's portrayal of non-normative sexualities questions the limitations imposed by society norms. By emphasizing the protagonists' battles against the strict demands of family and culture, this thesis contends that *Cobalt Blue* offers a critical reflection on the flexibility of identity. This study seeks to understand how the novel redefines ideas of love, desire, and self-acceptance by delving into the protagonists' emotional and psychological depths. In the process, it hopes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between social restrictions and individual freedom. The novel challenges heteronormative ideals, evolving societal attitudes, and patriarchal structures, promoting understanding, empathy, and acceptance of LGBTQ voices. The novel challenges the heteropatriarchal ideology that has led to the erasure of queer sexuality in India, where radical progressive ideologies are considered post-national and rarely welcomed. The novel encourages understanding, empathy, and acceptance by recognizing the malleability of identity, strengthening the foundation of an inclusive community. It explores the sensual yearning of youth and the disillusionment of unfulfilled love, as well as the identity crisis of queer individuals. The protagonist, Tanay, and his sister Anuja, overcomes difficulties and establishes a new life away from family.

Tanay's Journey: The Poetic Fantasy of Development

Tanay, a young man in his early twenties who develops a romantic relationship with the unnamed paying guest, is introduced to the reader in the first part of *Cobalt Blue*. Tanay addresses the guest directly in a tone of calm reflection and longing, and Kundalkar's prose is introspective and rich in Tanay's inner monologue. The novel begins with Tanay's monologue, where he struggles to find his soulmate, PG. "That you should not be here when something we've both wanted happens is no new thing for me. Today too, always, you're not here". Tanay remembers the PG's arrival and how it drastically changed his life. He spent most of his time in the upstairs room, which was the room of his grandparents. Tanay's inner thirst for PG's smell was heightened by the smell of spring. PG's life was full of struggles and challenges, as he lost his parents when he was in the 10th grade. Tanay found the PG's life magnetic and deeply moved towards him. Tanay becomes deeply attached to PG and has a deep curiosity about his life. They share everything and have an intense relationship, participating in secret gay meetings and forming a cordial bond with another gay couple. Tanay, as a soulmate, attached himself with each of PG's interests and likings.

Tanay's quest to understand himself starts when he finds himself drawn to the paying guest (PG), which compels him to face his sexual orientation, social standing, and self-worth. The fifth stage of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, "Identity vs. Role Confusion," is essential to comprehending Tanay's experiences. During this phase of adolescence, a person wrestles with issues related to their identity, such as

their sexual orientation, their desired job path, and their social duties. Erikson contends that if this stage is successfully navigated, a strong sense of identity is produced, whereas confusion and a fractured sense of self are the outcomes of failure. Tanay's early adolescence relationship with Shrikrishna Pendse aids in his recognition of his homosexuality, despite the emotional wounds caused by the betrayal in that relationship. Tanay's identity is not immediately apparent, but his statement, "I took my clothes out of the cupboard and looked at myself in the mirror. I dropped the wet towel. I took a long, clear-eyed look at myself. That I was different was nowhere apparent", (20), represents a turning point in one's own understanding. It is evident from his acknowledgement that he is "different," even though this difference is not outwardly apparent, that he is having difficulty coming to terms with his sexual orientation. From Erikson's "identity versus role confusion" stage, Tanay may be observed progressing at this point toward ultimate self-acceptance.

His subsequent, deep love for the PG is a turning point in his identity-formation process as he wrestles with the tensions and inconsistencies between his inner aspirations and society's expectations. Even though Tanay's story is laced with sadness, his insights into the relationship—especially after the guest departs—indicate his developing emotional maturity. He turns his emotional suffering into a kind of lyrical, introspective development rather than becoming resentful or hopeless. Despite his longing, his reverie reveals a nuanced understanding of how short the relationship is, which is a crucial sign of maturity. Though quiet and contemplative, Tanay's reflection on lost love and his developing self-awareness constitute a kind of personal development; therefore, this part of his trip makes sense within the Bildungsroman paradigm.

Tanay's emotional path is influenced by his interactions with society in addition to being propelled by love and heartache. The idea presented by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* contends that identities are socially created via repeated performances and that the binary system of gender and sexuality is constrictive. "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act, or more specifically, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being.'" (Butler's *Gender Trouble*, p. 33). These conventions are broken by Tanay's relationship with the PG. How strongly society norms have influenced his self-perception, is demonstrated by his internal conflict regarding his urges, particularly his humiliation and subsequent attempts to purify himself following physical contact with other males. "We pleased each other for the pleasure of giving pleasure. After that, I would be empty of any feeling, except for a loathing of my body. I would go into the bathroom and scrub myself clean. I would wonder why I was doing this" (34). The pressure Tanay feels to conform to socially created heterosexuality norms is reflected in his internal conflict, which manifests as an oscillation between shame and desire. His physical cleansing routines after interactions with the various guys, which he uses to purge himself of anything society considers "impure" or "abnormal," serve to highlight this tension.

These incidents demonstrate the degree to which society regulates people's conduct and how Tanay internalizes these expectations, resulting in feelings of shame and guilt. "The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female.'" (Butler's *Gender Trouble*, p. 23). According to Butler, cultural frameworks have the power to mold and constrain people; in Tanay's case, these frameworks cause him to feel guilty for defying heteronormativity. Tanay's love for the PG is shown in *Cobalt Blue* as being genuine and organic, defying these normative boundaries. The book does not characterize Tanay's desire as evil or moral, even if he struggles with guilt. Instead, it exposes the conflict between personal identity and societal suppression and confronts the systems of society that have made his sexuality illegal. Tanay's journey—where his connections with men question the rigid binaries of masculinity and femininity as enforced by society norms—illustrates Butler's notion that gender is "a doing rather than a being."

An additional perspective for examining Tanay's journey is provided by Michel Foucault's views on power, discourse, and resistance. According to Foucault, language and societal norms are the means by which power operates, and people who defy these standards are frequently excluded. Tanay stands in contrast to these conventions in *Cobalt Blue* because he rejects conventional family and society institutions through his non-heteronormative love. By renouncing family ties, caste, and clan and stating, "I have no home, no caste, no clan," (39), the PG also challenges conventional societal norms. Tanay and the PG defy social norms, particularly those pertaining to marriage and family life, which is consistent with Foucault's statement that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Michel Foucault's book *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, p.95). Tanay's reflections on cohabiting with the social misfit as PG and his query, "What do two men who decide to live together do?" (25), which provides additional evidence for Foucault's theory of resistance inside power institutions. Tanay is aware of the marginalization that follows such resistance, even as he imagines living a life that deviates from social conventions. The way he views this marginalization emphasizes how ingrained power systems are in society and how difficult it is to live within them.

When the PG elopes with his sister Anuja, Tanay feels betrayed, and this exposes his emotional growth. This incident shattering his romanticized vision of love compels him to face the realities of interpersonal relationships, where love is not always returned or everlasting. His selfscrubbing rituals after sexual encounters and his feelings of shame, especially afterward, indicate an internal conflict between acknowledging his identity and fitting in with society's expectations.

The strongly embedded taboo of homosexuality in a conservative community is reflected in his guilt, disgust, and subsequent cleansing procedures. Tanay starts thinking more carefully about who he is all the time. In

spite of social rejection, his ideas about leading a life with PG reflect his need to find a place where he may survive apart from the conventional norms of heterosexuality, marriage, and family. A life as a “social outcast” that is at least somewhat peaceful and self-defining is what he envisions. Tanay shows signs of emotional development and a deeper comprehension of identity and love by the end of the novel. He changes with time, going from a vulnerable and longing mood to one of betrayal and ultimately acceptance. Despite his ongoing anguish from the betrayal, the PG comes to terms with his past and acknowledges that love is a complicated and often unfulfilling relationship. The goal of his evolution is to discover a sense of self among emotional turmoil, not to reach the ideal conclusion. His personal emancipation is symbolized by his acceptance of his identity and emotions in spite of social rejection, even though it is not fully achieved. Tanay represents a silent kind of resistance, akin to Foucault’s idea of opposing power systems from inside, by defying the demands of heteronormativity and traditional relationships in society. Though defying social conventions may not bring acceptance, it does provide a measure of self-liberation, as evidenced by his reflections about living with the PG as a social outcast. Therefore, part of his maturation is realizing where he fits into society and coming to terms with the idea that, while not fitting social norms, his identity and love are still genuine.

By fusing subjective perception with objective truth, *Cobalt Blue*’s postmodernist style subverts conventional narrative frameworks. Tanay’s shattered sense of self might be understood as a metaphor for this fragmentation, which is a prevalent issue in postmodern literature where identity is viewed as a concept that is always changing rather than a fixed or coherent one. The wider societal conflicts that people like Tanay, who straddle the line between heteronormative and gay identities, experience are also reflected in this postmodern fragmentation. The difficulties of contemporary, metropolitan Indian society are reflected in his identity as he vacillates between social conformity and personal desire, remorse and self-acceptance.

Anuja’s Journey: Independence and Rebellion Against Social Expectations

The second half of the book, narrated by Anuja, differs from Tanay’s, but it nevertheless follows the Bildungsroman themes, especially in her declaration of self-reliance and uniqueness. It is possible to see Anuja’s choice to depart with the guest as a defiance of the social expectations placed upon her. Although it is a dangerous act of rebellion, it also symbolizes her ambition to overcome the constraints of her familial and societal duties. Anuja’s choice to elope with the visitor is a brazen declaration of liberty, and Bildungsroman protagonists frequently face or reject authority in these kinds of instances.

In contrast to Tanay’s blissful nostalgia, her emotional path is characterized by conflict and frustration. Her acts and ideas reflect a woman finding her place in the world and juggling the intricacy of her ambitions and social restraints, even though her reasons for leaving are not entirely clear. The Bildungsroman’s focus on inner turmoil and the protagonist’s quest for purpose in her decisions is reflected in Anuja’s personal development. Compared to Tanay, her progress is more noticeable and outwardly rebellious, which gives her path more significance in this story. Anuja’s act of eloping with the paying guest might be interpreted as a rejection of the “performance” that was required of her as a woman in her society, and this is where Butler’s notion of performativity comes into play. Anuja’s disobedience exemplifies her reluctance to live up to society’s expectations of what a woman ought to be like, demonstrating Butler’s idea of performative resistance.

Anuja is introduced as a cool and middle-class Maharashtrian girl at the start of the book, living in her family’s traditional home. She complies with social conventions and family expectations as the dutiful daughter. She had a typical, straightforward sibling attachment throughout her early relationships with her family, especially with her brothers. From an innocent young woman seeking love and independence, she transforms into a mature adult who faces the consequences of her choices and endeavors to restore her identity. Her journey through a range of emotional states as she deals with rejection, family strife, and the expectations placed on young women in modern-day India is chronicled in the novel. Anuja interprets her eloping and rejection of conventional gender norms as a metaphor for her own identity struggles. She also aspires to be an environmental activist. Anuja’s acts are more overt in defying social expectations of women, while Tanay’s identity search is more subtle. The beginning of Anuja’s emotional awakening occurs with the arrival of the paying guest (PG). Anuja’s contact with the PG is initially more distant than Tanay’s, who connects with him on an immediate emotional level. But as their connection develops, it becomes more intimate and passionate, pushing the limits of her formerly segregated life. Anuja’s development depends on this relationship because it gives rise to feelings and wants she had never known. She feels a strong, passionate, and liberating attachment to the PG, which gives her a sense of autonomy and uniqueness that she did not have before. According to Erikson’s theory of identity development, both siblings struggle with social constraints, particularly those related to marriage and family. By leaving with the paying guest, Anuja defies social conventions in a way that her strict family finds scandalous. Her journey reflects the Bildungsroman’s examination of the conflict between social conformity and individual autonomy, and her disobedience indicates her rejection of the limitations imposed upon her. The typical Bildungsroman’s premise that social integration is the ultimate objective is called into question by Anuja’s tale. As an alternative, Kundalkar shows a protagonist who tries to identify herself independently of societal norms, which complicates and makes her development more difficult to resolve. Anuja views the paying guest as a way to break free from the constraints of her existence, but it’s unclear what exactly his role is in her story. Despite the fact that he does not provide her with any direction or guidance, his presence inspires her to take risks, like leaving home. As a result, the paying guest serves more as a growth agent for the main characters than as a stand-alone figure.

One could interpret Anuja's experience as a mirror of Erikson's Identity vs. Role Confusion stage. Anuja attempts to break free from her family's conventional expectations by eloping with the PG in search of love and a new identity. But when the relationship ends, her inability to forge a solid identity causes her to feel confused and deeply regretful. Her sentiments of hopelessness, melancholy, and suicidal thoughts are unmistakable indicators of role uncertainty. Her subsequent attempts to make amends with her family and society—especially in front of her mother and Maushi—highlight her battle to create a cohesive identity outside of traditional gender roles. "I messed up my first escape attempt. I wonder if there's something wrong with me." (118). This comment reflects Erikson's idea of an identity crisis and expresses Anuja's sense of failure in her quest for self-discovery. The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child and the ethics to be developed by the adult. "It is an ideological mind – and, indeed, it is the ideology of the time which provides the focal point for the combination of personal and communal identity." (Erikson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 245)

Anuja's struggle against patriarchal expectations is influenced by Butler's theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is a set of repeated actions and performances shaped by societal expectations. Anuja's actions, such as eloping with the PG, rejecting traditional familial roles, and rebelling against her father's patriarchal authority, "until the time you get married, you will behave yourself according to the house rules" (111), are seen as her attempt to perform her identity differently from the normative expectations placed upon her as a woman. "As a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right." (Butler's *Gender Trouble*, p. 190)

Freud's psychoanalysis theory provides insight into Anuja's relationship with her father, highlighting the tension between her desire for independence and her father's control, "We gave you your freedom and we saw what you did with it?" (111). This quotation highlights the tension between personal independence and family authority by expressing the father's dissatisfaction with Anuja's ineffective attempt to demand her autonomy. She feels alienated from both her family and society due to her choices. "Her parents aren't even interested in hearing about her sorrow or pain. They want it wrapped up, put away, forgotten." (112). Her reflection on her family's concern for social appearance rather than her emotional well-being shows societal prejudices and how we feel disconnected from our true selves.

Through her interactions with her family, psychiatrist, and introspections, Anuja confronts the pain and challenges of defining herself within a rigid social structure, ultimately emerging with a deeper understanding of her identity. After returning home and experiencing emotional upheaval, Anuja actively works to regain her independence. Her choice to go to the gym, look for work, and work toward financial independence is a big step toward her self-reconstruction. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's concept of having "a room of one's own," her inner monologue illustrates her developing realization that in order to truly become independent, one must have a private space as well as a stable income. 3. Seizing New Chances: Anuja's relocation to a new city in order to take a job at Green Earth represents her dedication to independence and self-actualization. She resists social pressure to follow traditional gender norms and her family's displeasure by preparing for interviews and pursuing a field job. Anuja's journey through *Cobalt Blue* is a Bildungsroman, highlighting her commitment to self-improvement and autonomy. She defies societal expectations by pursuing a field job and preparing for interviews, redefining her identity on her own terms. As she adjusts to her new life, she reflects on her past decisions and their impact on her identity. Overcoming challenges and reconciling with societal expectations is a

key aspect of her journey. Anuja's success in securing a job and living independently reflects her growth and independence. Developing an identity that exists outside of those limitations is more important to Anuja's growth than trying to balance her goals with society norms. Her path exemplifies the difficult nature of contemporary womanhood, in which achieving autonomy frequently comes at the expense of gaining social approval. Anuja's journey is therefore representative of the postmodern Bildungsroman, in which the quest for identity is disjointed and complex, and the achievement of a harmonic ending is less important than accepting the complexity of identity. Anuja's journey of self-discovery is characterized by internal and external conflict and, in the end, by her resolve to follow her own path regardless of what society thinks of her. Through her experience, Kundalkar provides a moving analysis of the difficulties of defining oneself in a society that aims to place strict limits on individual development.

The Paying Guest as growth catalysts

In a classic Bildungsroman, the protagonist's development is frequently influenced by a mentor or important person. The mysterious and rootless PG acts as a driving force behind the journeys of both siblings. His lack of surname, caste, or residence implies a defiance of social standards. Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse shows that institutions and everyday behaviors shape identity. The PG challenges caste, family, and social power hierarchies by refusing to comply with customary identity markers. Foucault's idea that "power is everywhere" is paralleled in the novel, as the PG opposes these systems merely by living outside of them. Even if the guest in *Cobalt Blue* is still a mystery, Tanay and Anuja's changes are sparked by his presence. Cobalt blue was the PG's favorite colour and the colour of his canvas as well. He filled Tanay and Anuja's lives with blue, the color of loneliness. In his life, he never lacked options. Tanay and Anuja also served as his substitutions. His love relationships with both siblings push them to face their feelings, desires, and social

expectations. Referencing Sigmund Freud's idea of repressed desire, Tanay's hidden sexuality can be perceived as being revealed by the guest. Tanay's emotional journey matches Freud's theories regarding the suppression of wants and their eventual expression, since his love for the guest shows a side of himself that he has kept hidden from his family and society. One significant turning point in Tanay's psychosexual growth is that his interactions with the guest help him face and embrace his desires. Although his place in Anuja's story is equally unclear, she views the guest as a means of escape from the constrictive life she leads. Even if he doesn't give her any direction or advice, his presence inspires her to take risks, like leaving the house. As a result, the paying guest serves more as a growth agent for the main characters than as a stand-alone figure.

Conclusion

In *Cobalt Blue*, Kundalkar writes a story that perfectly captures the Bildungsroman's process of self-discovery and identity construction. The transformation of Tanay into a self-aware young man who is struggling with his sexual identity and eventually comes to terms with it, representing the genre's central internal and external struggles. Anuja eventually achieves selfacceptance and serenity. She gets a job, lives on her own, and comes to terms with her previous choices. Her voyage demonstrates how she changed from a young woman bound by social conventions to an independent person who forges her own way. Even if their struggles are very personal, they also represent larger cultural conventions and forces that control relationships and identity. Because of this, *Cobalt Blue* provides a strong examination of resistance, love, and identity via the prism of the Bildungsroman.

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