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Rethinking Heroism: A Polyphonic Bildungsroman in Bardugo's *Six of Crows* & *Crooked Kingdom*

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Dedications

To my family, your support and belief have been my strength. Everything I am is thanks to you.

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Abstract

The figure of the hero in Young Adult fantasy has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from the morally upright protagonist in the Bildungsroman to an increasingly complex antihero. While earlier research discussed the evolution of the Bildungsroman from Victorian to modernist forms, few studies have analysed how Young Adult fantasy merges with heteroglossia and polyphony to challenge singular moral authority. This dissertation's main objective is to investigate how Bardugo's use of multiplicity of voices fragments the characters' growth trajectory and complicates Kaz Brekker's morality as an antihero. The insights gathered from in-depth textual analysis and literary theory demonstrate that polyphony broadens the scope of the Bildungsroman by combining its Victorian and modernist characteristics, destabilising the boundaries between heroism and villainy. The findings reveal that Bardugo contributes to broader literary discussion by revealing how Young Adult fantasy reimagines the Bildungsroman as a space of collective growth and moral ambiguity.

Keywords: Antihero, Heroism, Heteroglossia, Moral Ambiguity, Polyphony, Modernist Bildungsroman, Young Adult Fantasy.

Résumé

La figure du héros dans la fantasy pour jeunes adultes a subi une profonde transformation, passant du protagoniste moralement irréprochable du Bildungsroman à un anti-héros de plus en plus complexe. Alors que les recherches antérieures ont traité de l'évolution du Bildungsroman des formes victoriennes aux formes modernistes, peu d'études ont analysé comment la fantasy pour jeunes adultes s'associe à la polyphonie pour remettre en question une autorité morale unique. L'objectif principal de ce mémoire est d'examiner comment l'usage de la multiplicité des voix par Bardugo fragmente le parcours de développement des personnages et complexifie la morale de Kaz Brekker en tant qu'anti-héros. Les analyses textuelles approfondies et les apports de la théorie littéraire montrent que la polyphonie élargit la portée du Bildungsroman en combinant ses caractéristiques victoriennes et modernistes, déstabilisant ainsi les frontières entre héroïsme et vilenie. Les résultats révèlent que Bardugo contribue au débat littéraire en montrant comment la fantasy pour jeunes adultes réinvente le Bildungsroman en un espace de croissance collective et d'ambiguïté morale.

Mots-clés : Hétéroglossie, Polyphonie, Bildungsroman victorien, Bildungsroman moderniste, Fantasy pour jeunes adultes, Héroïsme, Antihéroïsme, Ambiguïté morale.

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General Introduction

Storytelling is a powerful means of transmitting wisdom about the distinct ideals and ethics of the world's societies. Whether through childhood fairytales or legendary epics, heroes have always been models of glory and virtue. From ancient Prophets in Biblical narratives to chivalrous warriors who slay dragons to valiant queens who defy their foes, these figures were our inspirations and prototypes that shaped our understanding of heroism, morality, and identity. Nevertheless, these once long-held portrayals of heroes became a site of interrogation.

With the growing interest in individualism in the 19th Century, writing about the strong warrior who fights to reaffirm his gallant traits was no longer the main attraction. Instead, the Victorian Bildungsroman aimed to describe the hero's inner battles by shedding light on his moral and psychological formation, emphasising his successful journey toward adulthood and conforming to a social order. Yet, as societies change and evolve, so do their people's ideals and worldviews.

Setting the stage for modernist deconstruction in the 20th Century, the modernist Bildungsroman portrayed individuals who grapple with alienation, moral paralysis, and the constant search for meaning in life. Protagonists no longer moved toward clear moral resolutions. However, they had to deal with existential doubt and instability, mirroring the impact of the First World War, leading to postmodern extensions by exposing the limitations and exclusivity of traditional coming-of-age narratives. While maintaining the modernist foundation, postmodern writers often employed irony, metafiction, and breaking the fourth wall to question the notion of growth.

Within this developing space, Young Adult (YA) literature emerged as a significant reconfiguration of the Bildungsroman. By maintaining the foundational focus on growth and discovery, Young Adult (YA) fiction adapted the genre to reflect adolescent concerns through themes like trauma, systemic injustice, and belonging. While some authors relied upon classical

heroic archetypes through their protagonists' portrayals. Other writers represented their characters as antiheroes within a world where heroes are no longer purely virtuous and villains are not as one-dimensionally evil as we might perceive them, to mirror the contradictions that linger in the world.

In stories like Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* (2015) and *Crooked Kingdom* (2016), the protagonists live in Ketterdam, where the dichotomies of good and evil are merely a façade. To cope with the city's corruption, they mimic its mercilessness and make morally questionable choices. They are neither pure nor idolised. There is no particular hero whom the story centres on, and their actions and motivations blur the lines between heroism and villainy and reinforce obscurity. They disrupt the long-held archetypes of heroism with their complicated history and discuss the flaws inherent in individuals and systems.

Nonetheless, they remain arguably sympathetic. Their coming of age deviates from the traditional notions of the Victorian Bildungsroman while still retaining some of its components. In addition, Bardugo employs a polyphonic narrative structure in her duology, which is the coexistence of multiple perspectives in a story with no superiority, weaving together multiple voices, goals and motives to shape the story. This approach creates characters who defy simple categorisation as purely good or evil.

This dissertation aims to study how Bardugo combines a subverted Bildungsroman with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony in her duology to create a story built by a multiplicity of voices and forged with unconventional growth paths. Through this combination, Bardugo's duology expands the notions of the Bildungsroman by presenting personal growth not as an individual but as a collective struggle against a world marked by moral ambiguity and the relentless pursuit of self-fulfilment.

This dissertation also seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse about the evolving nature of heroism in Young Adult (YA) literature by positioning the character of Kaz Brekker

as the story's most prominent antihero. Additionally, the study attempts to demonstrate how polyphony complicates the depiction of modern identities and collective struggle, shedding light on how contemporary Young Adult (YA) fantasy shifts away from simplistic, monolithic notions of growth, heroism, and moral clarity by offering a new perspective on the genre.

Guided by the objectives above, the following questions are addressed:

1. How is the Bildungsroman subverted, and how does polyphony contribute to reshaping it in *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*?
2. How does polyphony interfere with individual growth in the Bildungsroman and moral ambiguity through the characters' stories?
3. What makes Kaz Brekker an antihero, and how does his character challenge the concept of good and evil through polyphony in the Duology?

After further readings, the following hypotheses are proposed to lead the investigation for the questions above.

1. Firstly, it is suggested that Leigh Bardugo subverts the Bildungsroman by retaining core elements of the Victorian Bildungsroman and combining them with elements of the modernist one. Merging her protagonists' unfinished and interwoven stories through polyphonic narration offers a unique story of survival and growth that can be interpreted from multiple angles.
2. Secondly, it is posited that that Bardugo's employment of polyphony ensures the equal multiplicity of viewpoints in the duology and shapes the characters' exterior images of each other, further obscuring their moral codes.
3. Thirdly, it is hypothesised that Kaz Brekker is neither good nor evil. Nevertheless, his actions and motivations stem from combined selfish and thoughtful qualities, placing him in a morally grey area.

This research work is divided into three main chapters. The first begins by providing an overview of the novel using Bakhtin's theory of novelisation. It, then, discusses his concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony through his literary interpretations of Fyodor Dostoevsky's works. Then, it traces Bildungsroman's definitions and distinctions and studies its Victorian characteristics and modernist reinterpretations. Moreover, it explores Young Adult (YA) fiction and the rise of antiheroism and ambiguity within its fantasy subgenre.

The second chapter analyses polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia manifestations by examining the characters' storylines, confrontations, and the narration techniques Bardugo employs in *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*. Next, it analyses how the author subverts the Bildungsroman by combining its Victorian elements with its modernist notions. Then, it discusses the common point between polyphony and the subverted Bildungsroman.

The third chapter analyses Kaz Brekker as the most conspicuous antiheroic character in the narrative by discussing the root of his monstrosity, redeeming traits, and how his motivations and actions complicate his personality. It also analyses how polyphony obscures his morality and true identity through the image that other characters paint him as, based on their interactions. Lastly, the chapter examines how Bardugo's depiction of Kaz Brekker engages with Young Adult (YA) fantasy's shifting interpretations of heroism.

To conclude, the methodological tools in this dissertation are based on qualitative research approaches, drawing on a thorough examination of sources to analyse Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*. The primary sources consist of the duology itself, with a close textual examination of key passages and dialogues highlighting multiplicity of voices, collective growth and moral ambiguity to support the dissertation's claims. Secondary sources include works such as literary interpretations and criticism of scholars like Bakhtin, Moretti, and Buckley. Finally, the dissertation's format follows the seventh edition of the MLA Handbook, along with the consistent and careful guidance of the supervisor.

1. Chapter One: A Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Introduction

As the novel became a dominant genre, Bakhtin emphasised its significance using his novelistic innovations that challenged the traditional structure of narration. In addition, the Victorian Bildungsroman typically followed a hero's journey toward adulthood by gaining spiritual and moral growth and harmonious social integration. However, modernist and contemporary narratives critiqued and reconfigured this trajectory. Overall, this chapter establishes the theoretical foundation to lead the examination of this research through Bakhtin and his concepts of the novel, the Victorian Bildungsroman, its modernist reinterpretations, and the contemporary reimaginings that challenge its protagonist's depiction and linear growth in Young Adult (YA) fantasy.

1.1. An Overview of the Novel

The emergence of the novel was a reaction to profound social, political, and cultural transformations during the 17th and 18th Centuries, making it a dominant narrative form. While oral tradition and storytelling have existed for millennia, early narratives such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer's *Iliad* established ancient narration. However, "our usage of the term 'novel' was not fully established until the end of the eighteenth century" (Watt 5), this period marked a grand shift in literary history by abandoning the epic's literary standards, as the novel began to reflect the reality of individual experience and everyday life. Setting itself apart from the conventions of earlier forms.

The novel genre expanded with the emergence of the middle class and expanded with the rise of literacy and the invention of the printing press. These developments created a new readership that sought literature that mirrored their lives and struggles. In his work on *The Rise*

of the Novel, Ian Watt identifies realism as "the defining characteristic which differentiates the work of the eighteenth-century novelists from previous fiction"(5). In the 18th Century, realism became a hallmark of the novel, as seen in works like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, which focused on ordinary protagonists by exploring their psychology and realistic depictions of social environments and their dynamics.

The novel's ability to adjust to other literary contexts garnered the attention of numerous theorists. Most notably, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic, devoted much of his work to understanding the novel's characteristics and role in literature. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Bakhtin argues in his study of "Epic and Novel" that the novel is fundamentally distinct from other genres, such as the epic, which he describes as static and completed, claiming that "the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes" (3). To him, this incompleteness, far from being a weakness, is the novel's greatest strength, allowing it to evolve perpetually and reflect the ever-changing realities of human experience.

Bakhtin develops a theory about the novel being a dynamic and self-critical genre that renews itself "through the principles of parody and self-parody" (Golban 62). Unlike traditional genres that adhere to fixed canons and rigid conventions, the novel thrives on its lack of a definitive form. This flexibility enables it to absorb, critique and transform other genres through a process Bakhtin calls "novelization" in which he explains that it "does not imply [other genres'] subjection to an alien generic canon; on the contrary, novelization implies their liberation from all that serves as a brake on their unique development, from all that would change them along with the novel into some sort of stylization of forms that have outlived themselves" (qtd. in Golban 62). In other words, novelisation liberates other genres from stagnation and allows them to evolve and remain relevant in a changing literary landscape.

Moreover, he contrasts his views with those of George Lukacs, who also sees the novel's embodiment as a growth in consciousness in *The Theory of the Novel*. However, although Lukacs approaches the novel through typology and comparison, Bakhtin emphasises its dialogic and polyphonic nature. For him, the novel's power comes from its ability to mix with other genres because it renews its thematic and significance, revitalises other genres within it, and maintains their relevance through time. He reveals the genre's unique capacity to reflect the intricacies of human experience by tracing key 18th-Century works, such as Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Weiland's *Agaton*, and Friedrich von Balnkenbeurg's *Versuch über den Roman,* as texts demonstrate the pivotal moments in the genre's growth.

In his"Essay and Novel" from *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin outlines four features that distinguish the novel from other narrative forms:

> (I) the novel should not be 'poetic,' as the word 'poetic' is used in other genres of imaginative literature; (2) the hero of a novel should not be 'heroic' in either the epic or the tragic sense of the word: he should combine in himself negative as well as positive features, low as well as lofty, ridiculous as well as serious; (3) the hero should not be portrayed as an already completed and unchanging person but as one who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life; (4) the novel should become for the contemporary world what the epic was for the ancient world. (10)

This highlights the change in the protagonist's perception in the novel. For instance, epic protagonists were admired idols with unchanging virtuous traits, even after their most challenging trials. Nevertheless, these characters are no longer static and perfect; they are as human as they can be: complex, constantly growing, and they learn from their life experiences even if they do not grow in the epic sense. This is linked to Bakhtin's characterisations of

protagonists in the novel, where he developed the concepts of heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogism.

1.2. Bakhtin's Conceptual Framework

Bakhtin is an outstanding scholar who helped form our perception of narratology by developing heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogism as concepts. These concepts point to the heterogeneity of language and the novel, as well as the ongoing interaction among various voices. His intakes on Heteroglossia are substantial for understanding how polyphony functions through dialogism, which showcases how characters from different social backgrounds coexist, interact, and even argue within a story.

1.2.1. Heteroglossia

In his essay on "Discourse and the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin highlights the ability of the novel to integrate heteroglossia, which he claims to be "a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised" (263). To him, unlike genres that present a singular, authoritative voice, the novel embodies heteroglossia, which is the versatility of registers in a story that helps indicate a character's social situation and personality. This unique feature allows characters to express their perspectives, represent diversity, and be independent entities within a story.

Stylistic diversity within the novel plays a huge role in establishing polyphony. Bakhtin identifies five essential elements that contribute to this multiplicity: "direct authorial narration, stylization of oral everyday narration *skaz* (dialect or slang), stylization of semi-everyday form (letters or diaries), extra-artistic authorial speech (philosophical statements), and the stylistically individualized speech of characters" (262). These elements interact within the text and resist shallow description because the characters' speech is not just a plot function, but a demonstration of their unique social and ideological stance.

For instance, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, voices portrayed by the characters, including Ivan's rational and philosophical mind, Alyosha's spiritual humility, and Dimitri's spontaneous and unstable speech, express various social and ideological beliefs. However, no single perception is greater than the other; they interact and affect each other. In this regard, the novel orchestrates ideas and themes through the various speech types and autonomous perceptions of the characters that unfold within the text. The interplay among authorial speech, characters' dialogue, as well as other embedded discourse, makes heteroglossia possible, and this constant interplay ensures that any perspective reaches absolute dominance, further solidifying the novel's fluidity and resistance to hard ideological closure.

Through the adoption of various linguistic styles, societal dialects, and philosophical approaches, the novel is itself heteroglossic in nature, as people interact and exchange meaning through contrast and dialogue. Incorporating this idea into its structure, the novel resists static interpretations so as to be a distinctly changing genre, reframed through ever-shifting societal contexts. However, Heteroglossia is only manifested through dialogism, one of the central features of polyphony.

1.2.2. Polyphony

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin defines polyphony as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (6). This means that every character in polyphonic novels is treated as an autonomous subject with their consciousness, worldview, and voice. Like in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the voices of Ivan, Dimitri, and Alyosha portray distinct philosophical and moral ideologies, none subordinated by the other or the author's voice. Instead, they interact dialogically, crafting an open-ended and ideologically pluralistic story. According to Bakhtin's work, four interrelated qualities of Dostoevsky's polyphonic art can be found: Self-consciousness, dialogism, the author's part, and unfinalisability. From Dostoevsky's literature, all these qualities form a

foundation for understanding polyphony's broader implications in literature and the novel in particular.

1.2.2.1. Self-Consciousness

At the heart of his novels lies the feature of self-consciousness. Unlike traditional narratives, where external traits and fixed identities often define characters, Dostoevsky's heroes are constructed around their internal awareness of themselves and their surroundings. Bakhtin argues that "what is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself" (47). This reversal of narrative engagement turns attention toward subjective experience and away from objective reality so that self-awareness becomes the overarching perspective through which figures are interpreted.

For Dostoevsky, self-awareness is not merely a psychological trait but the essence of his characters' existence. Through their self-awareness, they engage with the world, articulate their ideologies, and confront their moral problems. Bakhtin notes that "the hero as a point of view, as an opinion on the world and himself, requires utterly special methods of discovery and artistic characterization" (47). Dostoevsky's characters are not static entities but kinetic subjects in constant dialogue with themselves and others. Their self-consciousness absorbs all external features like social status, physical appearance, and even their actions, transforming them into materials for self-reflection and self-identity.

This approach rejects the notion of static and finished characters. Characters like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* or Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* are never fully reduced to a single interpretation. Their self-consciousness ensures they remain open-ended, always capable of surprising each other and the reader. "Dostoevsky's hero is all self-consciousness. . . . Dostoevsky's hero is infinite function" (Bakhtin 51). Dostoevsky's characters, for instance, Rskolnikov or Ivan, are able to go beyond the confines of

conversational characterisation through the versatility and uncertainty of their consciousness because of their limitless functionality.

1.2.2.2. The Dialogic Nature of Truth

Dialogism is a fundamental pillar that embodies polyphony and heteroglossia. Unlike monologic novels, which present reality as a fixed, authoritative construct, Dostoevsky shows truth as emerging through the interaction of multiple perceptions. Bakhtin describes that "truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth in the process of their dialogic interaction" (110).

The concept of dialogism is observed through Dostoevsky's characters and their dynamic towards each other. Each is positioned within a specific ideology, and their dialogue is interwoven into a tapestry consisting of competing and complementary ideas. Based on this, Bakhtin posits that "Dostoevsky's hero is not only a discourse about himself and his immediate environment, but also a discourse about the world; he is not only cognizant, but an ideologist as well" (78). They are not mere story characters; they interact with wider philosophical and societal issues and create their own beliefs.

Apart from its linguistic heterogeneity, its temporal openness further enhances its dialogic structure. In contrast to epic literature that is caught in a fixed and mythical past, the novel is situated in "the time of the present, incomplete and open-ended" (Bakhtin 11). Therefore, events and ideas in the novel remain open to revision and reinterpretation. Characters, themes, and ideologies never stand still but change as a result of engagement with contrary opinions.

Dialogism is evident in how characters interact and their voices are framed within the novel. Rather than being passive subjects to only one narrative angle, characters in a dialogic narrative engage in genuine conversations that shape the story's ideological landscape. The

narrator's voice does not entirely dominate the characters, even when authorial speech is dialogised, but constantly interacts with them and their social commentary (Bakhtin 272-73).

Additionally, dialogism exists in the novel's structure through internal monologues, conflicting worldviews, and indirect engagement between different layers of discourse. In other words, dialogism is not confined to outward conversation alone but is even an internal debate with oneself. This aspect is also seen in the writer's interaction with his characters, where he does not take up a superordinate perspective. Rather, he constructs a space in which his characters' voices exist and collaborate.

1.2.2.3. The Author's Influence

In polyphonic novels, the author's role is fundamentally different from that in the monologic novel as "the author constructs the hero not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact, he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero's *discourse* about himself and his world" (Bakhtin 53). This perspective enables their own voices to be heard by them and their words to be said independently of authorial control.

Rather than projecting his own views onto his characters, the author makes room for each person's point of view to have independent meaning. Bakhtin describes this as a "dialogic relationship" (63), where the writer does not speak on behalf of his characters but interacts with them. The lack of dominant authority disproves the notion of the writer being the sole creator and narrator of the story. The characters themesleves do not remain passive objects crafted by the author but are active partakers. Bakhtin stresses that "the author's design for a character is a *design for discourse*" (63), i.e., their authority is identical with that of the writer. An intended distance from the characters also marks the author's role in polyphonic prose, and is directed

toward asserting that the characters do exist independently and remain unfinished. So, the writer is able to compose an authentic dialogic story.

1.2.2.4. Unfinalisability and the Open-Ended Hero

Unifinalisability is another key feature of Bakhtin's study on polyphony. In his novels, Dostoevsky embraces the idea that humans are inherently open-ended and incapable of reaching a complete resolution or being fully defined. Bakhtin describes this as the "inescapable open-endedness" (51) of his heroes, who are always in the state of becoming, never fully coinciding with themselves.

This unfinalisability is closely tied to the characters' self-awareness and resistance to external definitions. According to Bakhtin, the protagonist "always seeks to destroy the framework of other people's words about him that might finalise and deaden him" (59). The underground man in *Notes from Underground* and Nastasya in *The Idiot* possess a complete awareness of themselves as perceived by others but do not want to be accounted for through those exterior judgments. Difficulty with defining them is less an effort toward personal identity and more an action about their freedom and their humanness.

The open-ended nature of Dostoevsky's protagonists also reflects his novels' broader philosophical and ideological concerns. Refusing to finalise his heroes, the Russian author challenges the deterministic worldview that reduces individuals to fixed categories or social types. Bakhtin asserts that "the genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a man and himself, at this point of departure beyond the limits of all that he is a material being, a being that can be spied on, defined, predicted apart from its own will, 'at second hand'"(59). The characters' open-endedness elevates their complexities, making them enduring subjects of literary and philosophical inquiry.

1.3.3. Carnivalisation

Carnivalisation is a literary phenomenon rooted in the tradition of medieval carnival, where social hierarchies, norms, and prohibitions are temporarily suspended. It allows for the subversion of authority and the assertion of multiplicity, chaos, and renewal. In Dostoevsky's works, carnivalisation manifests through scenes of scandal, absurdity, and social upheaval, where characters are no longer tied to their usual roles and engage in eccentric, often paradoxical behaviour. The latter contributes to the emphasis on polyphony in Dostoevsky's novels. Carnivalistaion forges a "*free and familiar contact among people*" (Bakhtin 123). It dissolves class, age, and status barriers and enables people from both social and ideological distinct standpoints to assume various roles or argue and confront one another passionately.

Carnivalisation manifests in moments such as disorderly masses in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where boundaries between the sacred and profane are blurred. Taking Marmeladov's tavern speech in *Crime and Punishment* as an example, the social order is inverted as a drunk man is assigned a prophet-like status to articulate profound truths on suffering and redemption. De-hierarchising makes space for polyphony so that characters get to reveal their taboos and subvert the fixed identities they present in public. Besides, carnivalisation is linked to the genre of Minippean satire. It comprises "sharp dialogic syncrises, extraordinary and provocative plot situations, crises and turning points, and moral experimentation, catastrophes and scandals" (Bakhtin 156). The use of sarcasm in speaking about dogmatic and theological concerns in such a context carries through with the carnivalesque tone.

Eccentricity is another important factor that enables people to behave in ways that are "inappropriate" or "out of the ordinary" (Bakhtin 123). It allows the suppressed sides of human nature to emerge, revealing people's contradictions and complexities. For instance, when the

Underground Man internally mocks himself in *Notes from Underground*, he inverts the traditional notions of heroism and rationality by exposing the absurd side of humanity.

1.3.4. Critical Assumptions

Before ending this section, it is substantial to discuss the persistent misreadings of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel by critics who impose monologic frameworks, thereby reducing its dialogic complexity to a singular, unified worldview. Scholars such as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Sergei Askoldov, and Leonid Grossman exemplify this tendency. Ivanov, for instance, interprets Dostoevsky's realism through the lens of "penetration" rather than dialogue, focusing more on the ethical solipsism of characters over their interactive dynamic (Bakhtin 10). Solipsism means that only one's mind is sure to exist, and in this context, extends to morality, alleging that it is subjective and only exists within one's awareness. While he accurately identifies the principle of affirming another's "I" as central to Dostoevsky's art, he ultimately monologises this principle, embedding it with a "monologically formulated authorial view" (10).

Similarly, Askoldov reduces Dostoevsky's characters into mere embodiments of a monologic ethical framework, interpreting their actions as direct expressions of the author's ideologies. He states that Dostoevsky's primary ethical thesis is to "be a personality," but he shifts the focus away from the characters' autonomous voices and toward the author's predominant worldview (Bakhtin 11-12). Grossman, though praising Dostoevsky's ability to unify diverse elements. Bakhtin misattributes this unity to the "whirlwind movement of events" and "the unity of philosophical design" (14-15). By prioritising plot and design over dialogic interaction, these critics overlook the defining feature of Dostoevsky's polyphony: the coexistence of unmerged consciousnesses that resist reduction into a single authoritative perspective.

These critics' misinterpretations of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel reveal the persistent tendency to impose monologic conventions on his work. By condensing the characters into a single worldview, interpreting their behaviours through antinomies, or attributing unity to a philosophical structure or plot, they overpass Dostoevsky's artistry with regard to the polyphonic and dialogic interplay between unmerged voices. These misinterpretations restrict their understanding of his novels and prove the need for a greater openness and inclusivity in discussing polyphony in literature. In general, Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphony subverts and redefines the literary forms dependent on single, authoritative points of view. Among them is the Bildungsroman, in which individual growth leads to a mature and finalised form. Bakhtin shatters this unity so that various unmerged voices design growth from a distinct vantage point.

1.4. The Bildungsroman

The Bildungsroman is characterised by its integration of the protagonist's intellectual and personal development (Boes 1). The genre underwent significant changes since its discovery in 18th-Century Germany and evolved with the society's values and ways at that time. Victorian presentations tended to be preoccupied with their heroes' pursuit of achieving a peaceful societal integration. At the same time, modernist reactions rebelled against conventions through the acceptance of fragmentation as well as moral confusion and non-linearity. This section follows a chronology to determine the genre's origins and discuss its Victorian and modernist conceptions.

1.4.1. Origins and Key Features

The Bildungsroman emerged as a literary genre tied to the cultural and radical changes that happened in the 18th and 19th Centuries in Germany, before spreading across the rest of Europe. The term's roots come from the German word Bildung, meaning formation or education, and roman, as in novel or new in Latin, with its literal translation being Novel of Formation. Karl von Morgenstern is often credited with introducing the term in the 1820s.

However, some researchers argue that it was used earlier by Friedrich von Blankenberg in his *Essay on the Novel* in 1774, before the publication of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* in 1795, which is regarded as the first example of the Bildungsroman (Upadhyay 199).

It is a difficult task to establish an exact definition of the genre because it is surrounded by numerous approaches. The Bildungsroman consists of various versions centred on the growth of the protagonist. Nonetheless, their unique approaches to growth give an indication of the Bildungsroman's focus. The first variant is Erziehungsroman, or the Novel of Education, which follows the protagonist's formal education in an academic setting, and the Bildungsroman differs from this variant as its hero learns from his social landscape instead of an educational one in the literal sense.

The second in Entwicklungsroman, or the Novel of Development, emphasises general growth as opposed to a particular trajectory as in the Bildungsroman. The third is the Künstelrroman, or the Novel of the Artist, in which life as an artist is followed through for the protagonist. The literary critic Mariane Hirsch further distinguishes between the Bildungsroman, Erziehungsroman, and Entwicklungsroman by stating that:

> Bildungsroman is limited to those novels that illustrate Goethe's concept of Bildung; Erziehungsroman, or novel of education, describes works that deal specifically with problems of schooling or education ... rather than more generally with growth and development; Entwicklungsroman, an umbrella term more broadly applicable within the german tradition, includes those representatives of the genre that, though conscious of Goethe, depart from specific Gothean norm ... and incorporates as well the more specific Bildungsromans. (qtd. in Upadhyay 200)

Hirsch outlines three often conflated terms: the Bildungsroman, Erziehungsroman, and Entwicklungsroman. While the Erzhiengsroman is easily distinguished by its narrow focus on formal education (pedagogical development), the boundary between the other two is more intriguing. As Hirsch defines it, the Bildungsroman adheres strictly to Goethe's model by focusing on holistic self-cultivation through structured moral, intellectual, and social integration as seen in *Wilhelm Meister*. The Entwicklungsroman, by contrast, encompasses Goethean Bildungsroman and other growth narratives deviating from its ideals.

1.4.2. The Victorian Bildungsroman

In his work on the Victorian Bildungsroman in *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, Jerome Buckley explores the Bildungsroman's focus on the protagonist's growth, emphasising its narrative structure and thematic concerns; he identifies key characteristics that mark the main trajectories that the Victorian Bildungsroman's hero follows. The story starts with the hero's childhood and relative naivety and ignorance regarding life. He is raised in a small town in the countryside then, and is simple and traditional. But his initial placement proves to be inappropriate to him, as he looks for a more diverse experience and personal enrichment as well.

As the hero moves out into a wider society, city space is usually his destined location, providing prospects, complications, and modernity. The city is portrayed as a site of promise and menace, in which he must negotiate social conventions, economic challenges, and moral predicaments. According to Buckley, the city is a site of trial through which the hopes and values of the main character are tested and challenged and his compelled to encounter the harsh realities of aspiration, class and identity (18). For instance, in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Pip's voyage into London is his quest for an improvement in his standing within his society, but it exposes him to being corrupt by wealth and status at some point. Wilde's Dorian Grey is

also influenced by the corrupt nature of the city and the hypocrisy of its residents and ends up deteriorating morally and psychologically.

Money and social mobility are also major themes in the Victorian Bildungsroman as they act as the guide to growth or demise for its protagonist. Independence with money, as well as its absence, is a significant factor in determining his path because it tests his capacity to fulfil his ambitions and fit into society. Buckley points out that the relationship with money for his character symbolises his quest for independence and self-definition, and adds that "the handling of the money becomes a measure of the hero's moral growth" (18). Moreover, the people the hero meets in the city play a substantial role in his growth journey. Whether they are mentors, friends or enemies, his relationships help shape his identity, reflecting his strengths, weaknesses, and moral choices. For example, David Coppefield's attempt to confront his stepfather even after he no longer has power over him fails. It prompts the character to rethink his goals and values and helps him become more aware of himself and his part in the world.

Another important theme is freedom vs societal pressure. The struggle between individual desires and societal pressures is resolved in most narratives through reconciliation as the protagonist decides whether to fit into society or remain an outcast. Buckley notes that seldom is it an easy decision since it is a "complex negotiation among personal wishes and communal obligations" (18). In most narratives, as in *David Copperfield,* individuality conexists with integration into society as enacted through a symbol that signifies success in entering society and maturing. In other stories, as in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education,* a failure to resolve such tensions results in disappointment and unrealised promise.

Furthermore, the conclusion of the Victorian Bildungsroman illustrates the growth of the protagonist and resolving his internal strife. In most Bildungsromans, such as *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, the ending is marked by closure and stability, and the protagonist achieves a clear and definitive identity. Moretti describes this structure as a "teleological rhetoric," where

"the meaning of events lies in their finality" (7). That is to say that his purpose as a protagonist must be achieved by the end through his moral and social change.

The Bildungsroman is essentially interested in the growth and discovery process of its protagonist. But it is not just a process, as it is also an expression of societal and cultural changes, specifically those related to modernity. In *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti argues that the Bildungsroman emerged as "the 'symbolic form' of modernity" (5), capturing the tension between individual aspirations and the demands of a rapidly changing world. While earlier narratives glorify heroic deeds or tragic endings (the epic), the Bildungsroman focuses on the ordinary struggles of youth. It depicts maturation as an act of negotiation and adjustment. According to Moretti, it appropriates real youth and transforms it into a symbolic form by using the experiences of its protagonist to touch upon universal concerns such as identity, desire, and assimilation into society (5). This symbolic portrayal of youth highlights the genre's concern with the early years of life, in which people wrestle with defining themselves and their place in life.

What makes the Bildungsroman significant is its capacity to reflect the contradictions and ambiguity of modernity. According to Moretti, the genre formed when Europe entered modernity without an existing framework to direct it (5). Herein, the genre became a storytelling tool to make modern life understandable by using the growth of their protagonist as a metaphor for changes in the culture and history during that era. Moretti sees modernity as alluring and dangerous, characterized by high hopes and disillusion, a duality that the Bildungsroman expresses by representing its protagonist's "inner restlessness [and] mobility" (5). These elements symbolise modernity's realised consequences, in which novel ideas and prospects threaten old values and structures and allow people to navigate and uncertain world.

1.4.3. Modernist Reinterpretations

The Bildungsroman as a form evolved significantly during the modernist era. Perhaps most famously associated with an investigation into fragmentation and uncertainty, numerous authors went on to reinvent and reinterpret the Bildungsroman to suit modern existence changes. Remarkable figures like Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf critiqued the enlightenment ideals of the Victorian Bildungsroman by including themes of failure, ambiguity, and loss.

Gregory Castle and Jed Esty are notable writers who dissect modernist Bildungsroman adaptations. They both argue that modernist writers reject the idea of undeviating growth and harmonious socialisation. On the one hand, Castle critiques the genre for being reduced to a tool for social conformity in the 19th Century and explains that authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf sought to recover the traditional standards of aesthetic teaching and personal liberty, rejecting the institutionalised and pragmatic version of Bildung (1). The modernist Bildungsroman emerged as a response to the rationalisation and bureaucratisation of self-cultivation in previous times. For example, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the protagonist resists societal expectations and chooses artistic self-expression over conventional success.

With the growing interest in exploring failure and ambiguity, Castle states that the failure of the modernist protagonist to achieve a traditional Bildungsroman revitalises the genre and allows the author to discuss themes of alienation, fragmentation, and the identity quest (2). For example, in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel is not conforming his artistry to societal norms, modelling the intricacies of finding oneself in a society that requires compromise.

Conversely, Esty asserts that modernist fiction portrays its heroes as going through unresolved conclusions that result in them being trapped in their own times and being

underdeveloped (7). In Conrad's *Lord Jim*, the character's moral and psychological struggles lead to his death, symbolising the failure to accomplish a Bildungsroman's ending. Similarly, Esty describes the modernist Bildungsroman as "antidevelopmental fictions" (2) that do not adhere to the Victorian Bildungsroman. In *The Voyage Out* and *Jude the Obscure*, both Jude and Rachel's quests end in death and not integration into their respective societies, highlighting the struggles to fit into one's own world, symbolising overarching criticisms about bourgeoisie society and disappointment.

Modernist writers often employed innovative narrative techniques to depict real-life struggles accurately. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce are known for employing fragmented narratives and stream-of-consciousness techniques to translate the "longing for wholeness and harmony" (Castle 2) into a distinctly modern aesthetic. Woolf's use of inner monologues and disrupted narration in Mrs. Dalloway, for instance, mirrors the troubled nature of the character.

Additionally, Esty and Castle explore how modernist narratives shift from the masculine supremacy of the Victorian Bildungsroman hero, expanding the genre to include women's experiences and criticism of patriarchal structures. With the emergence of feminist waves and literary movements, Virginia Woolf's feminist novels exposed the limitations placed upon women by exploring characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe's lives as they navigate their rights and place in society.

Esty's analysis of the modernist Bildungsroman highlights its engagement with colonial and global contexts, a theme that postmodernism extends. He claims that modernist novels like *Lord Jim* and *The Voyage Out* reflect the unbalanced progression of colonial contact zones where imperialism's destructive impact disrupts the traditional ideal of progress (2). Postmodernist narratives take this further by exploring the haunting consequences of colonialism and the challenges of cultural fusion. Esty's emphasis on the effects of imperialism

provides an idea of how postmodern authors use Bildungsroman to depict the influence of colonialism, destroy stereotypes, and represent reality.

Esty's discussions about characters who do not mature or remain stuck in a specific timeline align with postmodern depictions of fragmentation. While modernism instigated fragmented identity, postmodernism extended it by denying a coherent and stable self. In postmodern protagonists, multiple contradictory and fluid identities often cohabitate to reveal their subjectivity. In David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, the main character battles identity and addiction to highlight the impossibility of obtaining a stable identity. Contemporary literature develops and expands upon its understanding of the Bildungsroman through stories that trace protagonists' experiences in navigating their societal context and struggling with morality and identity.

1.5. Young Adult (YA) Fiction

Young Adult literature centres on adolescent protagonists and their coming-of-age journeys in navigating issues and themes related to youth experiences, such as identity, belonging, or power. Ildikó Limpár suggests that "adolescents feel other than children and other than adults; they often feel that they are simply Others in an environment that they do not fit into" (11). Adolescent literature stories align with how teenagers perceive and function in their environment, where they often feel alienated or out of place.

The term "Young Adult" was created in the 1960s by The Young Adult Library Services Association. However, its origins go back to World War II, where teenagers were recognised as a distinct demographic, and Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* was the first novel written for adolescents in 1942. Young Adult (YA) literature is mainly targeted toward readers aged 12 to 18, but has an older readership that grew with its evolution. The genre gained immense popularity around the 2000s, with dystopian, fantasy, and fantastic novels such as *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, and many others.

Fantastical and dystopian elements dominated the Young Adult (YA) literary field until the 2010s. But as media expanded, awareness grew among people about political shifts in the world, and literature became an ever-changing medium, the genre inclined towards portraying neglected people and complex issues like racism, disability, trauma, and rape. Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give* and Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* are very popular narratives that explore those issues, allow for critical dialogue and raise more cautionary concerns.

1.5.1. Young Adult (YA) Fantasy

Within the realm of young adult narratives exists a subgenre that manages to keep its readers intrigued by supernatural, imaginative, and adventurous tales. Fantasy literature continued to evolve and transform through the generations, as literature did to adapt to a continually changing world. Although the genre existed before the emergence of Young Adult (YA) literature, merging the two enables the fantastic element to build on Young Adult (YA) themes and intensify its protagonists' struggles with self-definition and social dynamics.

In the context of Young Adult (YA) fantasy novels, this exploration of self-awareness and social forces is often amplified by the fantastic elements of the genre. For instance, in her work *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Trites notes that "protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them the way they are" (3). In fantasy, this process is not just an internal experience for the protagonist but is frequently fused with the external aspects of the fantastical setting that is built with its own social structure and moral frameworks. It mirrors real-world systems of oppression and inequality, where characters must survive at all costs to climb the social ladder. Through their works, notable contemporary authors like Leigh Bardugo, Sabaa Tahir, and Tomi Adeyemi demonstrate how Young Adult (YA) fantasy can be a critical lens to observe how protagonists challenge the social structures of their worlds and define their own lives.

1.5.1.1. The Rise of Antiheroes

Despite Young Adult (YA) fantasy being commonly branded as escapist, it goes beyond the boundaries of entertainment to become a space where themes of morality and rigid archetypes are a site of debate. Throughout history, the concepts of good and evil were often, if not always, the central dynamic in stories. Ancient narratives' protagonists were defined by their righteousness, loyalty and selflessness. In contrast, Vaillins represented chaos, deception and moral depravity. These narratives established the standardised archetypes for heroism that we know of today, privileging nobility, strength, and moral clarity, and reinforcing the strict binaries that left no room for ambiguity.

Impressive fantasy novels such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, C.S. Lewis's The *Chronicles of Narnia*, and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series all have similar presentations of the classic chosen, sacrificial hero. These books reinforce heroes' glorification and reinforce rigid moral dualism; yet, narratives such as L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a story that subverts and redefines moral concepts. For instance, Frank Baum contradicts the idea of evil through the portrayal of the Wicked Witch and Glinda the Good, where their stories do not adhere to the assumption that good triumphs over evil. The Wizard, a supposedly powerful and glorified magician, is later revealed to be an ordinary man with selfish intentions hidden under false pretensions.

By straying away from the black-and-white distinction of the hero and the villain, a new type of character has emerged who is not inherently good or bad but instead has both traits. This type of character is often known as the antihero. Figures such as the Byronic and Machiavellian heroes defy social norms, follow their passions instead of virtue, and manipulate and exploit for personal gain. However, despite all their flaws, they were still the main characters and the heroes of their stories with their redeeming qualities. Wilde's Dorian Grey, Brontë's Heathcliff,

Shakespeare's Othello and Richard III abandon the archetype of heroes and villains to become morally ambiguous individuals embodying both aspects of the dichotomy.

The antihero is a person with no sympathy or goodness; he achieves his goals through selfishness and at the expense of others. He is often the victim and the product of the circumstances of his past, making him redeemable. Mainstream media, television and Young Adult (YA) fantasy adapted this tendency and popularised this figure. The evil narrative shifted by showing the character as misunderstood, traumatised, and even relatable to the audience. For example, the infamous, horrific, blood-sucking creature of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* became the attractive love interest Edward Cullen, the tortured, sparkling vampire in Meyer's *Twilight* series. Milton's Satan, humanity's biggest enemy, became the charming fallen angel in the Netflix series' *Lucifer*.

Although some readaptations sympathise with their antiheroes by romanticising them, Bardugo uses polyphony to weaponise her characters' obscurity. In the *Six of Crows* duology, the characters' beliefs and motivations do not get condemned or redeemed, at least not in their entirety. But they get depicted as irreconcilable truths existing together through Bakhtin's dialogism. This deliberate unfinished conflict subverts the Bildungsroman's very promise that wisdom and harmony result from suffering and makes one reinterpret growth. Polyphony's structural multiplicity ensures that heroism becomes a negotiated, evolving concept rather than a fixed endpoint, reflecting Bakhtin's assertion that truth emerges through dialogue, not authority (110).

Bardugo's method is an interesting corpus upon which to examine the moral decisions of characters. By declining to grant primacy to a single voice and thus making heroism and change an ever-interpreted concept, Bardugo replicates in her fiction the complexity of actual ethics. This method is reminiscent of wider Young Adult (YA) fantasy trends towards moral ambiguity, as seen in Severus Snape's moral greyness in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series or in

Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* series ensemble viewpoints. This distinguishes her work as a radical subversion of both heroic tropes and the Bildungsroman's individualist trope.

1.6. Literature Review

The tension between individual growth and societal expectations has been a defining feature of the Bildungsroman since its Victorian inception. As seen in novels such as *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, the genre framed maturation as an individual path toward social integration and maturity. However, Young Adult (YA) fantasy works like Bardugo's *Six of Crows* duology challenge this model through polyphonic narration, where moral ambiguity and collective growth replace the protagonist's singular journey. Contemporary scholarship has yet to explore how Young Adult (YA) fantasy deals with polyphony, the Bildungsroman, and heroism, especially in Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*. Therefore, this review situates her work within critical discussions about the evolution of heroism in the Bildungsroman through polyphony to mirror the subgenre's hybridity.

Scholars like Buckley, Moretti, Castle, and Esty have extensively analysed the Victorian Bildungsroman and its modernist deconstructions. However, despite several studies that tackle the genre's evolution, only a few examine how it operates with polyphony or how its combination dismantles its core segments. This gap becomes evident when examining Bakhtin's polyphonic structure, which grants equal weight to multiple characters' voices. Similarly, Bakhtin developed this concept through Dostoevsky's novels, leaving its application to Young Adult (YA) fantasy underexplored, especially regarding how competing perspectives fundamentally alter the Bildungsroman's growth trajectory, social integration and heroic ideals.

Anotny N. Germaud's thesis on "Rowan Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Appeal of Polyphony" examines the link between Rowan Williams' works and Bakhtin's by analysing the manifestation of the polyphonic approach in his theological work. The thesis highlights how polyphony encourages a continuous dialogue and coexistence of multiple voices, advocating

for an ongoing conversation without superiority of perspective within the Anglican Communion, where differing opinions on contentious issues are continually debated and dialogised without an authorial subordination. This thesis gives an in-depth insight into how crucial dialogism is in understanding theological concerns by promoting ongoing dialogue rather than asserting authority in dialogue about practice and faith.

Daniel William also explored the polyphonic implications of the novel in his thesis on "Spectrum of Voices: Polyvocalism in the Novel and its Consequences for Narration," which elucidates the importance of exploring polyphony as a narrative principle in literature. It is heavily reliant on Bakhtin's novel and polyphony theoretical framework and on Julia Kristeva's concept of the social text. Williams' research highlights how polyphonic narratives enable an interplay among different ideas and craft a complex experience for readers with their dialogic nature.

Moreover, research conducted on the Bildungsroman provides an overview of how themes and conventions of the genre have evolved through time. Among them, Haider Abderrhamne Mansouri's article entitled "The Innovation in the Bildungsroman in British Literature: A Comparative Study of *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens and *Neverwhere* (1997) by Neil Gaiman" offers an insightful analysis of how the Victorian Bildungsroman genre has evolved within the British context. Mansouri argues that Dickens and Gaiman revolutionise the conventions of the genre, which traditionally focused on a young protagonist's journey toward maturity and self-discovery by analysing how the authors blend familial tropes and innovative narration to reshape the genre, making it relevant to contemporary audiences (37-54).

Furthermore, research on heroes and their evolution in contemporary literature and media demonstrates a noticeable shift of focus from glorious paragons to multifaceted beings. In the light of these studies, Mairuna Farhin''s thesis on "What Makes a Hero? From Past

Polarities to Contemporary Ambiguities" explores the evolution of character archetypes from traditional representations of heroes and villains to the emergence of morally ambiguous characters in contemporary Young Adult (YA) fantasy literature. By observing character archetypes in Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* series, this study highlights the increasing importance of moral ambiguity in Young Adult (YA) literature and how readers are more drawn to narratives that portray the complexities of being human.

Having traced some of the literature done on Polyphony, heroism, and the Bildungsroman in relevance to the current study's aim and focus, this part of the review now examines research conducted on Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, and how the existing foundation of these works establishes the basis of this study. Fatima Zahra Hosni's thesis "Troubled Teens: The Psychological Impact of Childhood Trauma on Young Adults in Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*" investigates the portrayal of childhood trauma and its psychological and social repercussions on Young Adult (YA) characters. She argues that Bardugo uses trauma as a lens to expose real-world issues and youth struggles with traumatic pasts. This thesis emphasises the representation of marginalised voices in Young Adult (YA) fantasy as well as how trauma can hinder interpersonal relationships and self-identity.

In addition, Margarét Júlía Björnsdóttir's thesis entitled "The Monster and the Wraith: The Effects of Trauma and Disability in Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows*" explores how disability and traumatic experiences shape identity and coping mechanisms. She argues that Bardugo contradicts stereotypes about disability in literature by making Kaz's disability part of his strength. In addition, she compares their traumatic past, suggesting that "by portraying different traumas, Bardugo allows her readers to relate and empathize with her characters and, in turn, enables readers to explore the different ways people process their traumatic experiences"

(Björnsdóttir 23). Through her analysis, this thesis proves a comprehensive understanding of Kaz and Inej's dual trauma response and how it shapes their life purpose.

Moreover, the article written by Nadia Ramadhiani Ranapoutri and Safrina Noorman is about an "Analysis of Power Dynamics in Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows*". They draw on Michel Foucault's theory of power to examine how the characters with their imperfect motives demonstrate a continuum of power relations representative of wider issues of hierarchy and authority. Their analysis underscores that power is fluid, shifting between characters based on context (154-68).

In their article "Virtues and Character Strengths of Kaz and Nina's Characters in the Novel *Six of Crows*," Muhammad Bahtiar Reza and Dwi Nitisari use Peterson and Seligman's theory of virtue and strengths to examine Kaz and Nina. Kaz and Nina have their six virtues: "wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence"(127), but they express different strengths that show their distinct personalities and experiences. The study as a whole adds to a greater understanding of character building within Young Adult (YA) fantasy as moral challenges and personal transformation play out through virtue ethics.

To sum up, these sources provide an overview of polyphony's impact on narration and speech authority, the Bildungsroman's innovation, and the contemporary depictions of heroism in literature. The existing scholarship on Bardugo is valuable in providing insightful information regarding the sociological and psychological aspects of *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*'s characters based on their understanding of disability, trauma, and power relations. However, through an observation of the narrative mechanism that governs such figures, this dissertation broadens the scope of Young Adult (YA) fantasy's Bildungsroman path and its rearrangement of the hero using Bakhtin's polyphonic method.

Conclusion

The theoretical underpinnings of understanding the Polyphonic Bildungsroman and its modern reinterpretation into Young Adult fantasy is established in the first chapter. The literature review discusses relevant works and highlightes the relevance and thoroughness of the topic at hand. Therefore, guided by the exploration of polyphony's defining features, the Bildungsroman's Victorian and modernist reinterpretation, and its contemporary depiction in Young Adult (YA) fantasy, the next chapter applies the theoretical findings on the duology to understand how Bardugo combines polyphony and the subverted Bildungsroman to craft an elaborate story of survival, redemption, and collective growth.

2.Chapter Two: Uncovering the Polyphonic Bildungsroman in the Duology

Introduction

In *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, Leigh Bardugo gathers an ensemble of imperfect and ideologically conflicted characters: Kaz, Inej, Jesper, Nina, Matthias, and Wylan. Their stories exist in tension and do not converge towards integration or resolution. Each holds onto their independence and resists the moral resolution and linear progress expected in the Victorian Bildungsroman. Instead of developing towards integration and mastery over themselves, these characters exist in changing allegiances, moral contradictions, and unresolved trauma. What emerges is a polyphonic structure for storytelling that resists the closure of narratives and destabilises the ethical framework of the coming-of-age genre. For Bardugo's duology, polyphony is neither an adornment nor an afterthought but an active form of resistance to ideology. This chapter discusses how the author subverts three foundational aspects of the Bildungsroman: moral certitude through dialogic conflict as a continuous process, individual victory through collective survival, and linear progress through open-ended conclusions.

2.1. Observing Polyphony: Truth as a Battlefield

Bardugo weaponises narration to stage an ideological clash, and each character's chapter becomes a territory where worldviews interchange. So, both major ideological battles in *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom* are discussed in this section: Kaz Brekker and Inej Ghafa and Matthias Helvar and Nina Zenik. Although each confrontation occurs separately in each novel, collectively they show how Bardugo utilises dialogism, one of polyphony's defining features.

2.1.1. Kaz and Inej: Pragmatism vs Faith

Having established the framework, we begin with Kaz Brekker and Inej Ghafa, where cynicism and faith intertwine. What is captivating about their relationship is that although they endured similar hardships in their childhood, their perceptions of theology are complete opposites. On the one hand, when Kaz arrives in Ketterdam with his older brother, they get scammed and become homeless, leading to his brother's death from Firepox contraction (a deadly disease in the Grishaverse). The loss of his brother and nearly drowning in a pile of corpses turned Kaz into a ruthless and pragmatic survivalist from a young age, "*survive, survive, survive*. It was the way he'd lived his life, moment to moment, breath to breath, since the terrible morning when he'd woken to find that Jordie was still dead and he was still very much alive" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 401).

He forced a spot for himself in the Barrel and rose to power through wits and cruelty, and his hands were always covered with black gloves, earning him the nickname Dirtyhands. On the other hand, Inej Ghafa was kidnapped from her family by slavers, shipped to Ketterdam, and forced into selling her body at the Menagerie. She only managed to survive that place through Kaz's paid indenture on her, just to become his skilled spy, the wraith. Even though she had been granted freedom, she chose to work for him and pay her debt, even if she had to kill or steal for him.

Like Dostoevsky's Ivan and Alyosha from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Kaz and Inej embody Bakhtin's "man of the idea" (85), who he claims not to be "a temperament, not social or psychological type" (85); their worldviews are personal beliefs and responses to past trauma. Kaz relies on control, vengeance and power as coping mechanisms; "Ketterdam is made of monsters. I just happen to have the longest teeth" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 521), while Inej holds on to her Suli faith and Saints to survive the psychological damage of her past. She would

always recite her saints' names "Petyr, Marya, Anastasia, Vladimir, Lizbeta, Sankta Alina" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 310), to reassure herself that her Saints are watching over her.

The core of their relationship lies in the constant disagreements about faith and materialism. Kaz's rejection of the gods is neither casual nor indifferent but defiant. When the moment presents itself, Inej challenges it: "'Greed is your god, Kaz.' He almost laughed at that. 'No, Inej. Greed bows to me. It is my servant and lever.' 'And what god do you serve, then?' 'Whichever will grant me fortune.' 'I don't think gods work that way.' 'I don't think I care.'" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 39). This exchange epitomises their ideological variance and deep closeness; Inej does not shy away from confronting Kaz, nor does he silence her.

Bardugo does not prioritise Inej's opinions over Kaz's or vice versa. However, they continually influence one another. Inej's devotion to her Saints is a lifeline she actively chooses. "Despite everything she'd been through, Inej still believed her Suli Saints were watching over her. Kaz knew it, and for some reason he loved to rile her" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 39). Nevertheless, beneath Kaz's provocations lies a profound uneasiness with belief itself, which is a reaction perhaps rooted in envy, grief, or disbelief that faith can survive where innocence does not. When she says to him, "men mock the gods until they need them" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 40), she speaks a theological truth and personal revelations into his shuttered heart. Thus, their competing world views are not so much about one being superior to the other but rather about differing responses to trauma. Inej's faith gives her a purpose, and Kaz's cynicism gives him a sense of mastery.

In a story, characters are not just isolated subjects; "they are a plurality of independent and unmerged voices" (Bakhtin 6). Bardugo displays this by depicting Inej's influence on Kaz by mimicking her sayings without undermining his atheist-cynical views "'You don't ask for respect. You earn it.' *You don't ask for forgiveness. You earn it*. He'd stolen her line. She almost smiled" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 378).

Kaz Brekker and Inej Ghafa represent Bakhtin's polyphony at its most balanced state. Two opposing worldviews that clash endlessly without resolution. Their debates never conclude, and their traumas never fully heal, yet this tension sustains their bond. Unlike traditional duos who grow toward harmony, they remain locked in a constant dialogic motion without synthesis. This unresolved dynamic makes their relationship the duology's purest example of polyphonic dialogism, apart from Nina and Matthias's far more volatile battle, where one voice ultimately transforms the other.

2.1.2. Matthias and Nina: Prejudice vs Nationalism

While Kaz and Inej's contrasting world visions remain unresolved forever, Nina and Matthias struggle over ideological dominance as they demonstrate the boundaries of equality in dialogue and coexistence between different viewpoints. They start their relationship as violent adversaries who fight through war rather than through words or disagreement over ideology, and develop it profoundly through ferocious dialogism.

Nina Zenik is a Grisha, which in Bardugo's universe (Grishaverse) refers to individuals born with the ability to summon and control matter, which they call "Small Science." Grisha are not magical beings but people with a heightened scientific understanding and supernatural control over the elements, the human body, or materials like metal or fabric. Nina is a heartrender, and her powers allow her to affect the body's internal systems. Beyond her abilities, she is strong, resilient, and patriotic toward Ravka, her hometown where Grisha are trained in the elite army. As one of the few nations that recognise her kind, Ravka represents safety, and her strong nationalism is a response to the global persecution of Grisha, especially in countries like Fjerda, which hunts and executes them as witches.

Matthias Helvar is a *Drüskelle*, a Fjerdan soldier trained to hunt and capture Grisha, whom his homeland views as "a blight on this earth" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 169). Fjerda is an intensely religious and militarised country based on tradition and purity. It indoctrinates its

citizens with hatred and fear towards the Grisha. These principles form Matthias's patriotism and make him intensely loyal and morally inflexible. Nevertheless, after getting to know Nina and seeing the humanity in those he was educated to despise, Matthias realises the contradiction in Fjerdan ideology.

Bakhtin explains that "truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (110). Matthias and Nina's quarrel is also a reaction to their previous encounter with their kind; they fight for what they believe is just. When Matthias meets Nina, his first word is "*Drüsje* [Witch]"(Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 225), mirroring his Fjerdan language to cudgel the intense animosity against her. On the other hand, Nina reciprocates those emotions by calling him "*Drüskelle*!"(Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 225).

Their conflict is a powerful exemplification of dialogism in Bakhtin's polyphonic art, and the tension takes place when the crew comes across Grisha, who was burned alive. Nina is devastated, and Matthias tries to defend Fjerda's justice system. "Nina whirled on him and shoved his chest hard. 'Don't you dare,' she seethed, fury burning like a halo around her. 'Tell me the last time someone was prosecuted for putting a Grisha to the flames. Do you even call it murder when you put down dogs?'… 'Do you have a different name for killing when you wear a uniform to do it?'" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 231).

Nina continues to fight off Matthias's defence of his country, and the debate escalates to the point where he questions whether her kind should exist at all, exposing his ingrained conviction and inner conflict.

> "Because our crime is *existing*. Our crime is what we are." Matthias went quiet, and when he spoke he was caught between shame for what he was about to say and the need to speak the words, the words he'd been raised on, the words that still rang true for him. "Nina, has it ever occurred to you that maybe ... you

> weren't *meant* to exist?" Nina's eyes glinted green fire. She took a step toward him, and he could feel the rage radiating off her. "Maybe you're the ones who shouldn't exist, Helvar. (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 232)

They are both shaped by pain, loss, and the propaganda of their nations. Matthias reveals that the loss of his family was because of a Grisha, which drove him into becoming *Drüskelle*. The latter is where dialogism becomes evident since the novel does not initially force any of their beliefs over the other. Instead, Bardugo lets them face each other, showing how complicated honest dialogue can be.

Their conflict does not break their bond; it strengthens it. Their opposing viewpoints change one another as Matthias begins to doubt his beliefs and leans more toward Nina's. He begins to adapt elements of Nina's perspectives without entirely abandoning his Fjerdan beliefs. "What if *Djel* [Fjerdan god] worked through these people? *Unnatural*. The word had come so easily to him, a way to dismiss what he did not understand, to make Nina and her kind less than human" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 291). This instance shows how he reconsiders his misconceptions about Grisha while still holding onto his Fjerdan faith.

Another instance that showcases the shift in Matthias's conviction is when he dedicates the sacred oath that *Drüskelle* soldiers pledge to Fjerda to Nina and promises to spend the rest of his life protecting her: "*I have been made to protect you*. His duty to his god, his duty to Nina. Maybe they were the same thing" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 292). The reconciliation between his duty as a *Drüskelle* and his love for Nina suggests that his previously rigid beliefs are not obliterated but rebuilt in a way that allows him to forge a new identity: "For the first time since he'd looked into Nina's eyes and seen his own humanity reflected back at him, the war inside him quieted" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 292).

Nina, Matthias, Inej, and Kaz exemplify Bakhtin's dialogic nature of truth. Leigh Bardugo portrays how Nina and Matthias's ideological conflict manifests through the tension

between deeply ingrained beliefs, with Matthias gradually evolving but never fully forsaking his Fjerdan convictions. Inej and Kaz's dialogism is more subtle, as their contrasting worldviews (faith vs pragmatism) also strengthen their relationship without compromise. Both pairs highlight Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, yet Kaz and Inej illustrate a persistent clash, while Matthias and Nina's interactions lead to a more mutual shaping of their identities.

2.2. Bardugo's Authority over the Characters

Leigh Bardugo's duology engages with Bakhtinian polyphony, particularly in how the author's consciousness expands to accommodate competing character voices without imposing finalising judgments (Bakhtin 68). The story develops through chapters built upon the characters' points of view to uncover them on a much deeper level. For instance, Bardugo relies on italicisation as a compelling narrative method. The latter often indicates a shift from external to internal voices to showcase their interior monologues, "the thought rattled noisily on Inej's head. *If Kaz was gone, would I stay? Or would I skip out on my debt? Take my chances with Per Haskell's enforces?* If she didn't move faster, she might well find out" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 26).

The use of italics also reveals a character's anxieties and the pressure of the moment: "*Ghosts*, Kaz thought. A boy's fear, but it came with absolute surety. Jordie had come for his vengeance at last. *It's time to pay your debt, Kaz. You never get something for nothing*" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 41). Additionally, it mimics natural patterns by emphasising certain words to mirror how people stress words in spoken conversations, "But if Bo Yul-Bayur is alive, *someone* is going to try to break him out of the Ice Court" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 79). It could also indicate sarcasm or dry humour, such as "*What kind of team is this for a mission so perilous*" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 117).

Moreover, the author employs a symbol in a crow shape to indicate a soft scene break, a shift in time, theme or emotional focus, such as Inej's flashbacks of her childhood before

being shipped and enslaved in Ketterdam or time passing after a scene. These stylistic choices assert the novel's polyphonic structure and ensure seamless transitions through time. Furthermore, the interchange between first-person to third-person limited narrations exemplifies the model of polyphonic authorship, where the writer's consciousness "broadens to accommodate autonomous voices" (Bakhtin 68) without imposing a monologic authority.

Each perspective is rendered with neutral authority without privileging a single worldview, as seen above in the dialogic tension. For example, when Inej's chapters disclose her story, the readers know which details are from her childhood memories and others narrated from the author's point of view: "Many *boys will bring you flowers … only that boy earns your heart*. That felt like a hundred years ago. Her father had been wrong. There had been no boys to bring her flowers, only men with stacks of kruge and purses full of coin" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 136).

Kaz's chapters adopt his mercantile pragmatism when he says, "when everyone knows you're a monster, you needn't waste time doing every monstrous thing" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 38). While Inej's chapters linger on faith and superstition, when she says "'if I were a Suli seer,' … 'I could look into the future and tell you it will be all right'" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 431), neither is framed as objectively correct. This approach cultivates unfiltered subjectivity, which is evident in Nina and Matthias's persuasions. Here, the reader actively participates in parsing contradictions without authorial mediation. Like Dostoevsky, Bardugo avoids finalising her characters; their ideologies remain in flux and resist didactic resolution.

2.3. Heteroglossia in the Duology

Per the previous chapter, the novel has different social speech types and ideologically charged voices. The duology manifests this plethora of backgrounds through the stylistically individualised language of each character's narration. For example, Jesper Fahey's casual speech blends fast-paced humour, slang and flippant observations to mirror his witty

personality: "*Nothing like being shot at a few times to make you a fast learner*" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 76). Inej's voice, by contrast, often adopts a meditative tone of "extra-artistic authorial speech", incorporating Suli wisdom, evoking a semi-religious or philosophical register such as "*The heart is an arrow. It demands aim to land true*" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 311).

Kaz's internal discourse frequently echoes his scepticism or calculative directives. Aligning with Bakhtin's "extra-artistic authorial speech" but infused with trauma and cynicism, "the trick is not to love anything" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 475). These distinct styles enact the heteroglossic layer of Bakhtin by not only enhancing the dialogic interaction between its characters but also exposing their multifaceted nature through their speech.

2.4. The City as a Site for Carnivalisation

Bakhtin defines carnvialisation as a literary mode where social hierarchies are temporarily suspended, allowing for a "*free and familiar contact among people*" (123). Rooted in the spirit of medieval carnival, it embraces eccentricity, inversion and ideological ambivalence. While central to Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels, this concept applies to Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, where Ketterdam becomes a carnivalesque space of chaos, upheaval and transformation. For example, "the buildings of the Barrel were different from anywhere else in Ketterdam, bigger, wider, painted in every garish color, clamouring for attention from passersby" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 69). The Barrel is a district in Ketterdam, known as a lawless and corrupt space, making it a contemporary carnival setting where authority is suspended.

Kaz Brekker, a crippled teenage gang leader, commands power over merchants and government officials, reversing traditional age and class hierarchies. He takes control of a bunch of criminals and rises to power. For instance, "Kaz was the exception__ the picture of restraint, his dark vest and trousers simply cut and tailored along severe lines. At first, she'd thought it

was a matter of taste, but she'd come to understand that it was a joke he played on the upstanding merchers. He enjoyed looking like one of them" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 23). This undermines Ketterdam's social hierarchy, in which wealth generally holds sway among the merchant class. Similarly, Wylan Van Eck's character, as a disinherited child of a wealthy businessman, is one of social reversal. He is first presented as being soft and in his place in the Barrel, but turns out to be an asset to his team. He takes over his father's empire by the end through criminal cleverness and deception rather than through lawfulness.

Bakhtin's Carnivalisation emphasises contradiction and ambivalence, where characters embody opposing traits and challenge the roles often assigned to them in society. For instance, Nina Zenik takes the drug of *Judra Parem* as an ultimate sacrifice to protect the crew, amplifying the darker aspects of the Grisha power, something she constantly defended. She becomes a representation of the monster-like image that Fjerdans always retributed to her kind: "'They fear you as I once feared you.' He said. 'As you once feared me. We are all someone's monster, Nina.'" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 427).

Moreover, Carnivalisation's most prominent feature is satire and parody, especially in how authority is mocked and power structures are turned upside down. This is perfectly illustrated in Kaz Brekker's gloves. He is known chiefly as Dirtyhands because of the reputation his gloves afford him. People in the Barrel say that "Brekker's hands were stained with blood. Brekker's hands were covered in scars. Brekker had claws and not fingers because he was part demon. Brekker's touch burned like brimstone" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 58). But his gloves are all that keep him from crumbling. Wearing gloves is a symbolic as well as a literal irony. It is a mockery of how easily people establish and preserve their reputation upon superficial things and conceal higher vulnerabilities underneath. The gloves confirm Kaz's reputation and protect him from his vulnerability.

In addition, carnivalisation puts people in a position to express contradictions and to unveil previously hidden elements of themselves through their unconventionality. Inej, for example, embodies a dual identity as a devout Suli and a dangerous assassin. Her faith and optimism contrast with her violent acts in the Barrel, in which the carnivalesque boundaries between high and low (purity vs crime) blend. Similarly, Jesper Fahey is eccentric in his personality. His charming and sarcastic behaviour buries a deep emotional struggle with his uncontrolled gambling addiction and hiding his Grisha identity as a Durast.

In general, carnivalisation blurs between high and low and by portraying the characters in such a setting, the author delivers a subtle commentary on humans' hypocritical nature. The innocents are turned into criminals, and the merchants thrive on vice. Through this lens, Bardugo uses Carnivalisation to critique the insincerity of social standards where those with power decide what is good and what is evil.

2.5. The Manifestations of the Victorian Bildungsroman

Even though Bardugo's multiplicity of perspectives seems to resist unbent development, traces of the Victorian Bildungsroman's trajectory persist, shaped by hardships, social immersion, the influence of the setting, and secondary characters. Nevertheless, they begin to fracture as these stories unfold, opening space for more collective and complex maturation.

2.5.1. Childhood, Youth and Socialisation

In *Season of Youth*, the Bildungsroman revolves around a protagonist's struggle to reconcile his identity with the external forces of society, often beginning with an early loss or unhappiness that shapes their departure from innocence or naivety (Buckely 17). According to Buckely, the hero's growth is marked by a conflict with family, oneself, or society, which in turn leads to the beginning of his journey. In *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, the author mirrors this structure through the wounds carried by Kaz Brekker, Inej Ghafa and Wylan Van

Eck, each of whom experiences a formative trauma that sets them on a path toward self-reinvention but also forces them to grapple with the limitations and obstacles of the world around them.

As a starting point, Kaz Brekker is a naive child with optimism and anticipation for the future. He and his brother go to Ketterdam following their parents' deaths. But Jordie's horrific death after losing all their wealth kindles his desire for vengeance as well as his growth into a criminal mastermind. Although his journey aligns with the Bildungsroman's model, Kaz's socialisation in Ketterdam is not a rational integration into a stable social order but a brutal immersion in the world of crime. "Kaz would always remember that moment, when he had seen greed take hold of his brother, an invisible hand guiding him onward, the lever at work" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 210). His memories form a turning point that shatters youth from naivety into individuation. But unlike its Victorian equivalent, in which departure is followed by a path through mentoring and education, Kaz's individuation is formed through criminality and vengeance and utilitarian reconstruction of identity. Losing his innocence is an aggressive process in which all prior suffering is utilised as building blocks to form identity.

Moreover, Inej Ghafa's departure from innocence is also shaped by trauma and exploitation. As Buckley outlines, the classical Bildungsroman begins with a decisive break from the safety of home and parental authority, which compels the protagonist to confront the external world and begin the process of self-definition. Inej's forced removal from her Suli family and subsequent exploitation in Ketterdam's Menagerie mirrors a brutal severance from cultural identity and innocence. "*I'm already a ghost*, she thought. *I died in the hold of a slaver ship*" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 307). Nevertheless, this dislocation initiates her moral and existential awakening, aligning with Buckley's description of the departure and formation of the Bildungsroman's hero.

Unlike Kaz and Inej, Wylan Van Eck seems to be the closest reflection of the Victorian Bildungsroman. When a protagonist loses his father through death or alienation, it usually symbolises his loss of faith in his family and leads him to look for an alternative (Buckley 19). Wylan's story begins with his flight from his father's grip after failing to meet his utilitarian expectations and facing rejection because of his dyslexia, forcefully stripped of his privilege and agency. However, Wylan finds refuge in the Barrel, where he meets Kaz Brekker to become a member of the crows and conspires against his father. This marks the rejection of inherited norms and the pursuit of individuation. Trauma and departure are not merely backstories but the catalysts that propel each character, in this case, Kaz, Inej and Wylan, are thrust into the liminal space where identity is reshaped. Growth emerges through the tension between internal values and external constraints.

2.5.2. Ketterdam as the Testing Ground

Ketterdam thrives on the illusion of civility, merchant councils, trade law and blinking gaslights. However, the city operates on a tiered hierarchy, with merchants at its top covering their deceit with wealth and faith, and the Barrel decaying with violence and crime. The weak are sold and bartered, the wealthy warp the law, and their gangs terrorise the streets with bloody fingers. Justice was a luxury under their capitalist system, and mercy an illusion.

The city in Victorian Bildungsroman is portrayed as a double-edged sword that tests, challenges, or refashions the hero's morality and ideals. Ketterdam serves this function with striking clarity. Inspired by Victorian London, a city known for its imperial grandeur, social decay, and being a typical testing ground in traditional Bildungsroman stories. Ketterdam embodies the contradictions of modern society; it is a site for capitalist excess, with its pillars being "*Enjent* [industry], *Voorhent* [integrity], *Almhent* [prosperity]" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 16), and its people worship a god called Ghezen, "the god of industry and commerce" (441). At the same time, it offers a means of survival, reinvention, and, at times, empowerment.

The city is also a proving ground and battleground for all its characters and reveals their weaknesses and transforms their identities. This is similar to classical Bildung protagonists who travel to the city in pursuit of identity and purpose, including Pip and David Copperfield. Bardugo's characters develop in Ketterdam's city streets not by moral and social integration but by crime and violence. Therefore, Ketterdam acts as an urban crucible that sculpts, marks, and eventually upsets individual advancement.

2.5.3. Mentors and Foes

In Bildungsroman, some individuals play the role of guides, catalysts for the process of growth for the protagonist, and challengers of their ideology. These characters are important for developing the moral direction of the protagonist through either wisdom, teachings, or ideology for their early self-development. In the duology, guide figures come from unusual places and play very unusual functions.

Kaz's formative years after his brother's death are shaped by his closest approximation of a mentor. Per Haskell, the old decaying leader of the Dregs offers him power not through education but by handing him the mechanics of fear, manipulation and control. After overthrowing his mentor, Kaz marks a key Bildungsroman moment where the protagonist outgrows his ideological roots, "'You have two minutes to get out of my house, old man. This city's price is blood,' said Kaz 'and I'm happy to pay with yours'" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 379).

Similarly, Matthias's early shaping occurs under the stern discipline of Jarl Brum, a military commander who indoctrinates him with xenophobia and religious dogma. After his confrontation with Nina, his rejection of his mentor's teachings echoes the Bildungsroman's essential movement from unquestioned belief to self-authored moral clarity, "He knew his mentor could not hear him, but he spoke the words anyway. 'the life you live, the hate you feel—it's poison. I can drink it no longer'" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 385).

Conversely, Antagonists push and hone the values of the protagonist into sharper form. Bardugo depicts villains as more than adversaries but as catalysts for personal transformation. Antagonists challenge the characters to reassess themselves, process their injuries, and establish boundaries for themselves. Kaz's antagonist, Pekka Rollins, and even the internal ghost of Jordie's demise are crucial to his development. Each character represents an aspect of betrayal or loss that Kaz must overcome in his own mind. Pekka Rollins is his arch-nemesis because he is his brother's tormentor; their battles reflect his battle with his past as well as how he takes back control.

Inej, too, is shaped by her foes, her traffickers, her memories, Tante Heleen, and Dunyasha. She achieves her liberation and justice by confronting her enemies and standing her ground, "*I am not sorry*, she realized. She has chosen to live freely as a killer rather than die quietly as a slave, and she could not regret that. She would go to her Saints with a ready spirit and hope they would receive her" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 461). Her opposing figures helped her recognise what she refused to become.

Wyaln's father, Jan Van Eck, is perhaps the archetypical Bildungsroman antagonist. He is a firm patriarchal figure who embodies control and repression. After realising his father's loathing of him for not being good enough, Wylan's rebellion against him parallels the traditional narrative of breaking free from the father figure to claim moral autonomy and independence. To sum up, by tracing Kaz, Inej, and Wylan's separate journeys, the author preserves key elements of the classical Bildungsroman, notably the departure from innocence, the formative impact of misfortune and confronting one's fears. In addition n, the Victorian London undertones of Ketterdam make it a setting of peril and cultivation, with mentors and adversaries forming the protagonist's paths; these arcs remain fragmented, signalling a shift toward a more collective and subversive visualisation of maturation.

2.6. The Subverted Bildungsroman in the Duology

Leigh Bardugo subverted the Bildungsroman's plot structure not by abandoning the genre, but by reclaiming and reshaping its elements through modernist reformulation. While some characters' stories align with the Victorian structure despite being unconventional, their narratives depart from linear individual growth to the fragmented progression model. This shift highlights how shared experiences, such as the heist and their fights in Ketterdam, serve as crucibles for transformation.

2.6.1. Fractured Stories and Collective Growth

As Castle observes, the modernist Bildungsroman disrupts the teleological arc of self-cultivation by foregrounding alienation and fractured identity (2). This fracturing is taken further in Bardugo's narrative, where no singular consciousness is privileged; instead, the polyphonic structure enables a web of intertwined developments. Kaz, Inej, Nina, Matthias, Jesper, and Wylan are profoundly flawed and shaped by their past traumas. They are driven by motivations like vengeance, a desire for freedom, or personal demons like addiction, creating a sense of fragmentation from the outset.

For instance, the latter is illustrated in Kaz's internal struggle: "Now the monster was here, dead-eyed and unafraid. Kaz Brekker was gone, and Dirtyhands had come to see the rough work done" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 32), highlighting the shielded identity he presents to the world. Similarly, Inej trauma manifests in her constant awareness of her past suffering: "Every horror came back to her, and she truly was a wraith, a ghost taking flight from a body that had given her only pain. *No*. A body that had given her strength" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 367), revealing her struggle to reconcile her pain with resilience. Jesper's restlessness shows that "he always seemed to be in motion" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 163), indicating anxiety and instability that belies his outward charm.

However, all of these characters undergo growth and redemption through interconnectedness. Each derives strength from the skills and capability of others, legitimates each other's weakness, and provokes each other's ideology. Such interdependent growth is sustained through Bardugo's polyphonic method by which all six of these characters have their own unique voice. The narration in the story moves among all six protagonists to show their influence over each other's evolving worldview. This is evident in Nina's internal conflict between her morality and ruthlessness. "If you wanted to kill a vine, you didn't just keep cutting it back. You tore it from the ground by the roots. And yet her hands were shaking. Wasn't this the way *Drüskelle* thought? Destroy the threat, wipe it out, no matter that the person in front of you was innocent" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 392).

Moreover, Matthias's long battle against his prejudices is infused through his relationship with Nina: "Matthias had always fought his decency. To become a *Drüskelle,* He'd had to kill the god things inside him. But the boy he should have been was always there, and she'd begun to see the truth of him in the days they'd spent together after the shipwreck" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 174). In addition, Wylan finding strength in his team is the ultimate example of being shaped by one's environment: "Wylan summoned every bit of bravado he'd learned from Nina, the will he'd learned from Matthias, the focus he's studied in Kaz, the courage he'd learned from Inej, and the wild, reckless hope he'd learned from Jesper, the belief that no matter the odds, somehow they would win" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 427).

This shared survival and devotion that the characters draw from one another changes Victorian conceptions of individual and independent growth that the Bildungsroman idealises. By showing a web of complicated ramifications in which each character's path affects the transformation of another's, they effectively rebuild the Bildungsroman through collective experience and joint transformation.

2.6.2. Redefining Social Integration

Social integration, long the telos of the Victorian Bildungsroman and the genre as a whole, is completely undermined in the duology. In traditional fiction, such as *David Copperfield* by Dickens, integration into society is the hero's reward and vindication of his moral and worldly goodness. However, critics like Esty and Castle identify a modernist departure from this model in which protagonists no longer grow toward the centre but remain estranged or critical.

In Bardugo's novels, the city sharpens this estrangement even more. Instead of seeking to be socially accepted, the protagonists navigate authority, survival, and fight against a system that seeks to erase and appropriate them. For them, Ketterdam is less a path to belonging and more a site for a constant fight for agency. For instance, Kaz's rise in the Barrel is not an acceptance into society but an act of tactical manipulation. "My mother is Ketterdam. She birthed me in the harbour. And my father is profit. I honor him daily" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 200). Instead of reconciling, he weaponises a system that once victimised him

Inej's path is not toward reintegration into a traditional home but toward creating a new moral order:

> Maybe there were people who lived these lives. Maybe the girl was one of them. *But what about the rest of us*? What about the nobodies and the nothings, the invisible girls? *We learn to hold our heads as if we wear crowns. We learn to wring magic from the ordinary*. That was how you survived when you weren't chosen, when there was no royal blood in your veins. When the world owed you nothing, you demanded something of it anyway. (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 460)

Moreover, Jesper's struggle with addiction and identity reflects how personal issues and societal expectations hinder conventional development: "Hundreds. Thousands. *I would have*

worn purple, Jesper thought, *if I'd joined the Second Army*. He reached for the fizzy elation that had been bubbling through him moments before. He'd been willing, even eager to risk capture and execution as a thief and hired gun. Why was it worse to think about being hunted as a Grisha?" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 350). Instead of finding integration, he comes to accept vulnerability and truth through a chosen family structure rather than his society's structure.

These orbits, according to Esty's "antidevelopmental fiction" (2). The city is a battlefield and not a destination, and the crew's experience with its institutions is one that is characterised by a model of Bildung through resistance and not assimilation. The histories behind the characters' personal circumstances involving enslavement, war trauma, addiction, disability, and abuse reveal how exclusive social integration is out of their reach. For instance, Wylan's social integration is not about gaining his father's approval but about finding what is best for him, even if it does not fit the archetypical standards demanded by society :

> Until this moment, Wylan hadn't quite understood how much they meant to him. His father would have sneered at these thugs and thieves, a disgraced soldier, a gambler who couldn't keep out of the red. But they were his first friends, his only friends, and Wylan knew that even if he'd had his pick of a thousand companions, these would have been the people he chose. (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 324)

Their world does not offer inclusion but forces adaptation or erasure. Thus, their development becomes a critique of that very world. Rather than moving toward the centre, Bardugo's characters spiral around it, exposing its failures while forging their own spaces of value and connection.

Six of Crows and *Crooked Kingdom* resist the Bildungsroman's unified arc by offering divergent, unresolved character paths that prioritise multiplicity over closure. Each storyline subverts linear development and social integration. This fragmentation reflects a sensibility

rooted in modernist critiques of progress and identity, where development is neither total nor teleological. Instead, it is enriched by the polyphonic narrative structure and the emphasis on Unfinalisability, positioning the duology within the broader tradition of genre subversion and ethical ambivalence.

2.7. Unfinalisability: Linking the Bildungroman with Polyphony

At the intersection of the subverted Bildungsroman and Bakhtinian polyphony lies a shared commitment to Unfinalisability, the idea that identity, growth and narrative itself cannot be conclusively resolved. Central to his theory of the polyphonic novel, a human being is always in the process of becoming, never reducible to external judgments or narrative closure. The protagonist "always seeks to destroy the framework of other people's words about him that might finalize or deaden him" (Bakhtin 59), opposing monologic tendencies that aim to define and complete a character's development.

This idea finds resonance in the Bildungsroman reimaginings, where Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom* employ polyphony and a subverted Bildungsroman structure to resist fixed endpoints for her characters. Instead, each arc culminates in unfinished emotional and ideological trajectories, reinforcing that growth is non-linear, relational, and often unresolved.

Kaz Brekker's refusal to leave Ketterdam and surrender his emotional armour epitomises this unfinalisability. He chooses to remain in the corrupt city that forged his trauma, not to redeem it or himself, but to control it. "Stay in Ketterdam. Stay with me" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 434). His moments with her encapsulate his weakness and vulnerable side, which he is often ashamed to reveal and showcase his inability to face his past to forge a new life with Inej.

It is not a failure to change but a conscious suspension of resolution. Inej, in turn, does not demand transformation or compromise her values to accommodate Kaz: "She could fight

for him, but she could not heal him. She would not waste her life trying" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 527). Their relationship is polyphonic, with two interlocking yet competing moral and emotive directions existing together without synthesis. In their refusal to submerge differences into a single narrative. Bardugo spurns the genre ideal for integration into harmony.

On the other hand, Matthias's arc offers another striking example of unfinalisability through narrative interruption. His long-awaited ideological reconciliation with Nina and his shift from *Drüskelle* indoctrination to ethical self-awareness culminate not in resolution but in an abrupt death. His redemption is suspended mid-course, leaving unanswered queries of forgiveness and transformation.

> "You will meet him again in the next life", said Inej. "But only if you suffer this now". They were two soldiers destined to fight for different sides, to find each other and lose each other too quickly. She would not keep him here. Not like this. "In the next life then," she whispered. "Go." She watched his eyes close once more. "*Farvell*," she said in Fjerdan. "May Djel watch over you until I can once more." (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 496)

Nina is left with an uncertain future and haunted by grief as well as by the pressure to keep up a story denied its closure. This sudden rupture denies readers the catharsis expected of traditional developmental arcs, mirroring Bakhtin's belief that a person never coincides with himself (59) and is always open to new meanings.

Even the more convenient Bildungsroman endings in the duology resist full closure. Jesper Fahey, for instance, reconciles his relationship with his father and the crew members but remains in constant struggle with his gambling addiction, which is not a triumphant transcendence of weakness but a commitment to live with it, a dynamic state of becoming. Likewise, Wylan Van Eck, although seemingly integrated within the noble society and reclaiming his power from his father, is left with a sense of internal void. His dyslexia and

trauma are not erased by wealth or recognition. The fulfilment of societal acceptance masks a deeper emotional ambiguity, which suggests that integration is not synonymous with inner peace in Wylan's case, reinforcing Esty's notion of underdeveloped adolescence in the modernist Bildungsroman.

Collectively, these character arcs exemplify how Bardugo mobilises polyphonic form and the Bildungsroman's subversion to critique the idea of personal development as straight, coherent, or conclusive. Each protagonist's journey resists assimilation into a unified worldview. The absence of finality, whether emotional, ideological or narrative, invites readers to embrace multiplicity and fragmentation as authentic reflections of contemporary selfhood. Bardugo's duology, therefore, functions not as a rejection of the Bildungsroman but as its radical imagining of a polyphonic and unfinishable Bildungsroman where the journey matters more than the destination and where resolution is not achieved but perpetually deferred.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated how *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom* subvert the traditional Bildungsroman by rejecting its linear structure, teleological resolution, and ideals of harmonious integration. Bardugo's narrative departs from the Victorian model through individual upbringing and unconventional social thrust by presenting fragmented, non-linear, and morally ambiguous arcs that reflect contemporary notions of identity and selfhood. By incorporating Bakhtin's polyphony, the duology allows several voices, ideologies and emotional beliefs to coexist without hierarchy. Thus, polyphony reshapes the Bildungsroman by displacing the centrality of a singular protagonist and embracing unfinalisability as a narrative and ethical principle.

3. Chapter Three: Deconstructing Heroism in Young Adult Fantasy

Introduction

While there is an increasing interest in portraying antiheroic characters with little to no conventional morality in Young Adult fantasy, the heroic figure is being substituted and abandoned. This is not just an aesthetic choice that follows modern trends. It is an attempt to change the concept of heroism itself. Leigh Bardugo adopts this shift through Kaz Brekker, a selfish, loyal, and monstrous yet weak character. His antiheroic depiction disrupts the expectations of the Bildungsroman's hero. Based on the foundational analyses of polyphony and Bildungsroman in the preceding chapters, this chapter proceeds to investigate how Bardugo's portrayal of Kaz Brekker through polyphony and the subverted Bildungsroman marks a broader literary reimagining of heroism in Young Adult (YA) fantasy.

3.1. The Tradition of Heroism in Young Adult Fantasy

As a subgenre based on explorations of coming-of-age narratives in imaginary and fantastic worlds, Young Adult fantasy has traditionally depended upon archetypes of heroes who already possess the qualities that make them morally righteous and selfless. Their trials they overcome confirm those traits and facilitate their social integration and moral stability, mirroring the Bildungsroman's traditional trajectory, particularly the Victorian one, where the innocent protagonist transitions from youthful naivety toward a mature and harmonious integration into a social order. Joseph Campbell recognises this track as the monomyth, in which the hero detaches from his environment, goes on an adventure, faces fantastic forces, then comes back with more power and wisdom (28).

Besides, this archetype is tied to the monologic narrative structure that privileges a singular perspective and linear growth. In such narratives, the hero is central not only in the

plot but also in narrative authority. The hero's moral worldview is the leading compass in the story, and the readers are rarely intrigued enough to question the hero's choice and motivations beyond what is provided in the storyline. Works like the *Shadow and Bone* trilogy by Leigh Bardugo, and Sarah J. Mass's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series embody this narrative structure and solidify the static model of heroism.

3.2. Antiheroism in Young Adult Fantasy

As Young Adult (YA) fantasy matured along with its readership, it opened up to characters who are no longer paragons of greatness but rather traumatised, morally unstable and flawed. These new figures' stories fit less with the Victorian Bildungsroman and more with a fractured polyphonic model that matches modern concerns over identity and power. The antihero figure rejects the notion that protagonists act as didactic examples. Instead, their actions and attitudes reveal flaws with societal structures that heroism aims to support. This shift is seen through darkly brooding heroes like Adelina Amouteru in Marie Lu's *The Young Elites*. Adelina's characterisation is anomalous for Young Adult (YA) protagonists whose lapse into villainy is not presented as weakness but as an interesting moral path whose empathy is compelling despite its aggressive implications.

Within this context, Kaz Brekker of Bardugo's *Six of Crows* duology represents a complex itinerary of the antihero in Young Adult (YA) fantasy. He does not engage in a redemptive quest or seek communal approval or moral affirmation. However, he operates through emotional detachment, manipulation and strategic planning. Bardugo grounds his characterisation in trauma, never defining Kaz solely as cruel. Additionally, his characterisation is also developed through a polyphonic novel structure as every member of his crew perceives him differently, complicating his moral reading further. Young Adult (YA) disturbs authority in narratives by making room for competing ideologies to exist together, and Bardugo's use of polyphony does exactly that. Kaz Brekker is not a hero because he is necessarily evil, but

because morality is not the only currency in the space where he exists. In so doing, Bardugo's rendition of Kaz aids in reconceptualising heroism in Young Adult (YA) fiction through an engagement with ethical nuance in a morally compromised world.

3.3. Kaz Brekker: Monstrosity as a Mask

In *Six of Crows,* Kaz Brekker is known as a fearful gang leader in the Barrel for his cruel and calculated nature. His upbringing and transformation paint him as the typical embodiment of the antihero, making him a compelling character in the Grishaverse series. Like most narratives, Kaz's story starts with him being an innocent young child with optimistic perceptions of his world, relying on his older brother for safety and comfort. However, he sheds his naivety due to getting betrayed and exploited in Ketterdam. He learns to live with the harsh realities of the world he was thrust into, becoming a product of the surroundings that shaped him.

Throughout his time in Ketterdam, he builds a strong reputation to ensure survival, earning his place as a leader and a criminal prodigy. His sinister and frightening demeanour in the Barrel is constructed through how he makes his path to power, how he treats his relationship with his team, and reaches his objectives. His survival tactics paint him as manipulative and egotistic. But his childhood experiences illustrate a strong aspect that makes him sympathetic.

3.3.1. Trauma as the Source of the Monstrous

Kaz's transformation into Dirtyhands is deeply rooted in trauma. When Kaz and Jordie became destitute, they both contracted the firepox disease, but his brother was the one to die: "When he woke, he couldn't smell hay or clover or apples, only coal smoke, and the spongy rotting vegetable stink of garbage. Jordie was lying next to him, staring at the sky. 'Don't leave me, ' Kaz wanted to say, but he was too tired. So he laid his head on Jordie's chest. It felt wrong already, cold and hard" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 274).

Kaz is not only damaged by his brother's death but also by the fact that they were swarmed by decomposing corpses floating away from the city's harbour:

> He tried to scream, but he was too weak. They were everywhere, legs and arms and stiff bellies, rotting bellies and blue-lipped faces covered in firepox sores. He floated in and out of consciousness, unsure of what was real or a fever dream, as the floatboat moved out to sea. When they tumbled him into the shallows of the Reaper's Barge, he somehow found the strength to cry out. (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 275)

This experience left him psychologically and physically scarred. One of the most visceral manifestations of this traumatic event is his refusal to touch human skin, which is why he always wears gloves. The gloves represent not just his past but also become part of his persona, allowing him to create distance from his vulnerable self through the monstrous figure of Dirtyhands that he performs.

In her work *The Truth of Monsters: Coming of Age with Fantastic Media*, Ildikó Limpár discusses the symbolism of monsters and their connection to adolescent experiences and trauma. In her analysis on the representation of the monster in *A Monster Calls*, suggesting that "the monster … is an unstable signifier that constantly seeks definition; as a consequence, clarifying the monster's function and intention promises the kind of revelation that may be needed for the protagonist to cope with his trauma" (154). She claims that the figure of the monster is not stagnant but evolves with the protagonist to reflect his struggle to cope with trauma. This resembles Kaz's use of gloves in the story as they symbolise a physical and a psychological shield for him.

For instance, when Kaz wears his gloves, he can no longer be affected by human touch, which would trigger a direct response to the memory of his brother's death and the fear of intimacy that it instilled in him. At the same time, the gloves allow him to isolate his

vulnerability and function unemotionally: “The gloves were his one concession to weakness. Since that night among the bodies and the swim from the Reaper’s Barge, he had not been able to bear the feeling of skin against skin. It was excruciating to him, revolting. It was the only piece of his past that he could not forge into something dangerous” (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 401).

When Kaz tried to swim back to the shore, he clung to one of the corpses to stay afloat, not realising at first that it was his brother’s body. The horror of that realisation caused his strong aversion to human touch and fueled a deep hatred for Pekka Rollins, the scammer whom he blames for his brother’s death. In order to take revenge and ensure survival in Ketterdam, he turned every part of his weak self into something cruel and dangerous. However, the fact that his revulsion from human touch was the only vulnerable aspect of his childhood that he could not turn into something beneficial made him feel shameful and even weaker.

Moreover, the city of Ketterdam is also a symbol of monstrosity itself due to its corrupt nature, making it a landscape that demands ruthless adaptation. To expand on Limpár’s insight on otherness in adolescent literature, she states:

> Adolescents feel other than children and other than adults; they often feel that they are simply Others in an environment that they do not fit into. Their coming of age is a process of leaving this kind of disturbing otherness, and by doing so, joining human society with a full membership. In order to do so, they must confront their monsters, and through understanding differences they must fight whatever constitutes their otherness. (11)

Kaz’s transformation into a dreaded criminal reflects Limpár’s notion of overcoming one’s otherness in the alienating space of Ketterdam. His monstrousity is not inherent but a survival mechanism forged in response to the city’s merciless nature. His transformation begins as soon as he swims ashore from the Reaper’s Barge. “Survival wasn’t nearly as hard as he’d thought

once he left decedncy behind. The first rule was to find someone smaller and weaker and take what he had" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 313). Kaz's violent acts reflect his relentless pursuit of revenge that cannot be fulfilled unless he marks his authority in the city.

His decisions and risks, even at a significant cost to others, stem from his determination to survive and avenge his brother. "Characters who must mature in such a monstrous space need to cope with monstrosity as an inherent quality of the world that stems from mankind's immature or evil attitude to nature; the characters' way of coping, therefore, is as much an individual survival as a contemplation concerning what humanity may or should do for survival" (Limpár 15). To everyone else, Kaz's actions seem morally reprehensible and even evil; to him, however, they are necessary to keep him alive and afloat in a life that left him broken and alone.

3.3.2. Redeeming Aspects in Kaz Brekker

Bakhtin states that "the hero of a novel should not be 'heroic' in either the epic or the tragic sense of the word: he should combine in himself negative as well as positive features, low as well as lofty, ridiculous as well as serious" (10). The antiheroic complexity of Kaz results from the oscillating tension between his cold-blooded nature and his hidden qualities that reveal his humanity, a duality that makes it impossible to label him as an evil figure in the novel. Kaz's monstrousness is an outward show that conceals very deep layers of loyalty, consciousness, and vulnerability, further complicating his classification as good or evil.

Despite his claims of self-interest, Kaz prioritises the safety and success of his team. For instance, when the crew is ambushed during their mission, Inej gets severely injured and almost dies, but Kaz's interference prevents that. "The rasp of stone on stone. Her eyes flew open. *Kaz*. He bundled her into his arms and leapt down from the crates, landing roughly, his bad leg buckling. She moaned as they hit the ground. 'Did we win?' 'I'm here aren't I?' … 'I don't want to die.' 'I'll do my best to make other arrangements for you'" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows*

152). Although he never makes it obvious to any of the characters that he cares about them, his actions do him justice in proving that. His relationship with Inej is a pivotal example of how he goes out of his way to protect and save her, showing how thoughtful he can be.

Kaz thinks of himself as a "businessman" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 23), so he often refers to Inej as an investment since he paid her debt and started working for him. He does not like to explicitly admit that she is important to him under the excuse of "I protect my investments" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 153). Nevertheless, the fact that he sold the Crow Club, his most prized possession and symbol of power in the Barrel, to buy Inej's freedom from the Menagerie shows how selfless he can be toward the people he values. In addition, he neither forces Inej to work for him nor tries to exploit her like other businesses in the city would. Instead, he respects her autonomy and gives her the choice to either stay or leave by not forcing her to have the Dregs' tattoo, "he said it was my choice, that he wouldn't be the one to mark me again" (Bardugo 188). If she indeed were nothing but an investment to him, he would not have cared to give her a chance at her freedom in the first place, especially after selling his most prominent source of income.

Furthermore, Kaz does not boast about being cruel or heartless, nor does he use his trauma as an excuse to justify his acts. He is very much aware of what his actions have turned him into. After Kaz's encounter with one of his rivals in the Barrel, he leaves him helpless, and when he attempts to threaten him, "You'll get what's coming to you someday, Brekker" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 32). Kaz's response suggests that he is aware of his exterior image: "'I will,' said Kaz, 'if there's any justice in the world. And we all know how likely that is " (Bardugo, Six of Crows 33). Since Ketterdam is known for its unjust balance, where the bad people often thrive, his answer implies that he includes himself among the corrupt people in the city.

Another instance of his self-awareness is when he uses his experience of feeling shame about his weakness to comfort Wylan about his. "Kaz tossed the lodger back in the safe. 'You're not weak because you can't read. You're weak because you're afraid of people seeing your weakness. You're letting shame decide who you are'" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 283). His words are not just advice for Wylan, but also a projection of how he perceives himself. "'It's shame that lines my pockets, shame that keeps the Barrel teeming with fools ready to put on a mask so they can have what they want with no one the wiser for it. We can endure all kinds of pain. It's shame that eats men whole'" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 283). This reveals Kaz's understanding of emotional pain and shows that he is capable of empathy, even if it is rarely expressed.

In addition, Kaz does not believe that he is redeemable and is acutely aware of his brokenness. His perception of himself does not mean he is a villain, but a flawed human being. His belief that he does not deserve forgiveness for his crimes makes him more tragic than evil. "These things don't wash away with prayer, Wraith. There is no peace waiting for me, no forgiveness, not in this life, not in the next" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 365). He acknowledges that his trauma explains his actions but does not excuse them or make him less guilty.

Kaz's moments with Inej are the parts that humanise him the most. Kaz believes that strength lies in power and that "weakness never earned respect in the Barrel, no matter how good the cause" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 478). He never allows himself to show any type of fragility. However, when he tries to help Inej after her severe injury, his interior monologue describes how hard he tries to overcome his struggle against human touch. "*I can best this,* he told himself. It was no different than drawing a weapon on someone. Violence was easy" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 361).

Removing his gloves to help Inej symbolises his willingness to trust her with his vulnerability: “Gloves lay on the other side of the basin, black against the gold-veined marble, they looked like dead animals”(Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 361). This gesture is not just a form of care but a silent declaration of what he cannot state in the open, that Inej matters to him more than his fear.

> *Step back*. He did not step back. He stood there, hearing his own breath, hers, the rhythm of them alone in this room. The sickness was there, the need to run, the need for something else too. Kaz thought he knew the language of pain intimately, but this ache was new. It hurt to stand here like this, so close to the circle of her arms. *It isn’t easy for me either*. After all she’d endured, he was the weak one. But she would never know what it was like for him to see Nina pull her close, watch Jesper loop his arms through hers, what it was to stand in doorways against walls and know he could never draw nearer. *But I’m here now*, he thought wildly. (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 364)

The author strips Kaz’s Dirtyhands facade away when he is with Inej and shows a broken boy behind the mask who armored himself in cruelty as a matter of necessity and not out of evil intentions. This touch of fragile humanity makes his antihero role complicated because even if he does not crave redemption, his ability to care shows moral awareness that goes beyond evil.

3.3.3. Moral Ambiguity within Kaz

While Kaz Brekker’s vulnerabilities with Inej mark a need for personal growth. After those moments, there is an extension of his extremely ambiguous nature. While his contempt is targeted towards all his other adversaries as villains, Pekka Rollins is precisely the person who masterminded the con that bankrupted his family and ruined his life. Kaz sometimes chooses to be “the better man” (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 480). Nevertheless, these choices are

strategic and personal rather than rooted in a moral code. What separates him from Pekka Rollins is not a purer heart, but a controlled ruthlessness and a sense of justice on his own terms.

For instance, when Kaz gets the chance to kill Pekka Rollins' son as payback for his brother's death, he does not, but he gives the impression that he did. His goal is to destroy his enemy, and he succeeds by making him beg for his son's life. "Kaz looked at Pekka Rollins, Jacob Hertzoon [the fake name he used with Kaz's brother], kneeling before him at last, eyes wet with tears, pain carved into the lines of his flushed face. *Brick by Brick*" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 478). His moral compass, while not absent, is crooked by the trauma and vengeance that drive him:

> He offered her a gloved hand. Inej heaved a long, shuddering breath, then took it, rising like smoke from a flame. But she did not let go. "You showed mercy, Kaz. You were the better man." There she went again, seeking decency when there was none to be had. "Inej, I could only kill Pekka's son once." He pushed the door open with his cane. "He can imagine his death a thousand times." (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 480)

He continues to acknowledge that he did not spare Pekka Rollin's son's life out of mercy, but because he simply wanted to see his nemesis in pain and humiliation.

In making his intentions more ambiguous, Kaz opts for the city and its corrupt system over a life with Inej despite his seemingly obvious feelings for her. His refusal to change or seek redemption makes him a classic antihero. He loves and cares deeply for Inej, but does not act upon those feelings when they get in the way of his quest for power, revenge, and dominance. This is neither a heroic nor a villainous choice. Rather, it indicates he operates out of his own moral compass, informed by trauma and cynicism rather than traditional morality.

"The hero should not be portrayed as already completed and unchanging person but as one who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life" (Bakhtin 10). Kaz's journey

does not end with the story's ending. Choosing the city means that his future experiences in Ketterdam are yet to teach new lessons and help him evolve toward self-acceptance and healing. "'I would come for you,' he said, and when he saw the wary look she shot him, he said it again. 'I would come for you. And if I couldn't walk, I'd crawl to you, and no matter how broken we were, we'd fight our way out together—knives drawn, pistols blazing. Because that's what we do. We never stop fighting'" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 184).

This quote illustrates that his emotions toward Inej are fused with emotions of violence and survival; his way of loving is not soft or gentle but filled with darkness and suffering. "She couldn't bear to see him dressed in armor once more, buttoned back into his immaculate suits and cold demeanor. "She wouldn't listen to him talk as if the Ice Court and everything that came after had been just another job, another score, another bit of advantage to be gained" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 523). Kaz never promises Inej, nor does he give the impression of change, regardless of whether he cannot or chooses not to.

Another pivotal occurrence that reveals Kaz's persistent rejection of change is his refusal to heal his leg, which is implied in *Crooked Kingdom*. When Genya Safin, a Grisha tailor, offered to fix Kaz's appearance after getting heavily bruised in a gang fight:

> He'd let the tailor set his nose, reduce the swelling on his eye so that he could actually see, and deal with some of the worst damage he'd taken to his body. But that was all he'd permitted. 'Why?' said Nina. "She could have—" "She didn't know when to stop," said Kaz. Nina had a sudden suspicion that Genya had offered to heal Kaz's bad leg. (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 396)

Kaz's limp leg is not a mere ailment he suffered in childhood. It is a part of the monstrous persona that built his fearful reputation, and letting go of that would mean surrendering the shield that kept him alive all this time. This constant denial to let go of his past is a conscious

self-preservation decision he chooses over confronting the demons of his past and seeking a new beginning, reflecting his antiheroism.

3.3.4. Kaz's Antiheroism Through Polyphony

To further emphasise his moral complexity and depth, Bardugo employs Bakhtin's polyphony to deliver some of the most psychologically revealing moments in Kaz's struggles. For instance, Kaz's interior monologue, where his brother's voice taunts him for becoming like his enemy, echoes his struggle between his authentic self and the monster he presents to the world. "*You failed me*. His brother's voice, louder than ever in his head. *You let him dupe you all over again*" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 419). This instance illustrates his dialogic nature within Kaz as he responds to the voices in his head, "*You failed me, Jordie. You were older. You were supposed to be the smart one*" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 419). Jordie's voice represents a second consciousness within Kaz's head, an accusatory voice that he cannot silence, leaving him in constant dialogue in his mind.

Kaz Brekker's characterisation is shaped not only by his interior monologues but also through the perceptions of the other characters. Among all the crew members, Inej Ghafa's views offer the most redeeming side of Kaz:

> She'd trusted Kaz Brekker that night. She'd become the dangerous girl he'd sensed lurking inside her. But she made the mistake of continuing to trust him, of believing in the legend he'd built around himself. That myth had brought her here to his sweltering darkness, balanced between life and death like the last leaf clinging to an autumn branch. In the end, Kaz Brekker was just a boy, and she'd let him lead her to this fate. (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 309)

Inej can see the calculated detachment of Dirtyhands but still recognises his vulnerability. Her perceptions also position Kaz as more than just a criminal when she hopes for redemption on

his behalf, "'I'm not ready to give up on this city, Kaz. I think it's worth saving.' *I think you're worth saving*" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 527).

Her refusal to accept the version he presents to the world signifies her belief in his redemption, and her ultimatums challenge him to confront himself, "I will have you without your armour, Kaz Brekker. Or I will not have you at all" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 434). Even when he resists her hopes for him, the tension does not resolve. Inej is the only person who can see through Kaz's shield; to her, Kaz is capable of healing, not just destruction.

Jesper Fahey, on the other hand, develops a more mythic and humorous opinion on Kaz. Jesper is admirative of Kaz's strategic mind and how he is always one step ahead of everyone, and often jokes about his omniscient planning, " Jesper could never tell how much of what Kaz got away with was smarts and planning and how much was dumb luck" (Bardugo, *Six f Crows* 145). Jesper's Kaz is a figure of invincibility, and even when they fall in situations with no escape, Kaz is the only source he relies upon for a plan, "'Kaz?' called Jesper from inside the tank. 'This would be a really good time to say you saw this coming'" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 421). Jesper is known for being reckless, and he often feels out of control due to his gambling addiction. So, his perception of Kaz offers him a sense of security and trust that he cannot find in himself, making Kaz his saviour, not through emotional support, but through his dependability and control.

Matthias Helvar's impression of Kaz evolves gradually. Coming from a morally rigid and honour-bound Fjerdan background, Matthias views Kaz as the antithesis of everything he values. "Matthias knew monsters, and one glance at Kaz Brekker had told him this was a creature who had spent too long in the dark—he'd brought something back with him when he'd crawled to the light" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 110). However, Matthias begins to see Kaz in a different light. He understands that he operates by a different moral code, one that values loyalty and survival over conventional virtue. "*Always hit where the mark isn't looking*. It was sound

thinking, Matthias could admit—military thinking, in fact" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 107). The acknowledgement of Kaz's cunning and effectiveness marks a turning point in Matthias's opinion of him. The shift in his perception mirrors his ideological journey, as he reconciles with his Fjerdan principles, the realities of the world, and the people he had grown to care for.

Moreover, Nina Zenik does not idealise or tolerate Kaz and often mocks his lack of empathy, "everything is a negotiation with you, Brekker. You probably bartered your way out of the womb" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 165). Yet, beneath her sarcasm lies an acknowledgement of his utility and, begrudgingly, loyalty, especially toward Inej. Her abilities as a Grisha heartrender allow her to observe people's physical state: "I can hear everybody on this ship, the blood rushing through their veins. I can hear the change in Kaz's breathing when he looks at you [Inej]" (Bardugo, *Six of Crows* 430). Nina does not necessarily portray Kaz as an evil person; she despises his self-interested and manipulative intentions, but she knows he is dependable when their lives are at stake.

Wylan Van Eck's encounters with Kaz progressively build his judgment of his character. Wylan's viewpoints in the story do not occur until they return from their first mission and work on a plan to destroy his father's legacy. He is aware of his unfitness with the Barrel's standards, and his innocence does not align with Kaz's cruelty: "Wylan didn't like looking at the world the way Kaz did" (Bardugo, *Crooked Kingdom* 23). Nonetheless, similar to Inej, Wyaln witnesses Kaz's empathetic aspect, which is rarely seen by others. Those instances suggest that Kaz relates Wylan's moments of vulnerability to his childhood, demonstrating Kaz's understanding of Wylan's struggle to cope with being betrayed by his only source of safety. Eventually, Kaz becomes a source of admiration and respect to Wyaln, not because of his Dirtyhands reputation, but because he was the only person who never judged or underestimated his potential.

Furthermore, Kaz Brekker's multilayered character is also described through his enemies. In *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, Pekka Rollins' point of view is shown only once at the end of each book. In *Six of Crows*, he thinks of Kaz as a petty upstart in the Barrel, dismissing him as a minor threat, "the problem of Kaz Brekker could wait to be solved another day. Right now there was money to be made" (Bardugo 462). However, his perceptions change drastically in *Crooked Kingdom* from underestimation to horror. "The lion was gone. In its place was a black-winged crow" (Bardugo 535). After knowing that Kaz Brekker was going after him for what he did to his brother, he decides to escape the city, acknowledging what Dirtyhands is capable of doing to people who cross him.

Kaz Brekker is a character fractured by design through Bardugo's polyphonic narration. The perceptions that others hold of him mirror his multifaceted identity and render him morally ambiguous. Each crew member constructs a version of Kaz's identity that reflects their desires, fears and values. These perceptions shape how he operates within the group and confronts himself. His moral ambiguity is not that he is not revealing his emotions, but that he is actively choosing not to be controlled by them.

3.4. Implications and Contributions

Kaz's unique presentation marks an important entry into the literary discussion of heroism in Young Adult Fantasy that is contrary to whose trajectories turn toward moral absolutism, spiritual growth, or redemptive endings, like Percy Jackson's path of self-discovery to becoming comfortable as an acknowledged demigod. Kaz Brekker's journey is fraught with trauma and is motivated by survival, not to be admired or idolised in an archetypical manner. He is a symbol of moral compromise, and his reluctance to adhere to heroic archetypes exposes their fictionality.

Although not new, this shift reflects a trend in Young Adult fantasy that leans toward antiheroism as a form of realism and resistance. Bardugo's duology resonates with the broader

cultural context where readers, especially adolescents, are becoming sceptical of binary moralities and simplistic narratives of good and evil. In a world where justice and morality are practically a myth, Kaz's story serves as a reminder that trauma, exploitation and survival are no longer abstract themes or a unique representation but lived realities. In his way, through *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, Bardugo offers an alternative mode of heroism and critiques the structures that define and often constrain it.

The duology's polyphonic character presentation and implications of her narrative technique for the Bildungsroman provide rich soil for literary analysis and theory. The scenario of all of the duology's characters, especially Kaz's, demands that one reconsider the Bildungsroman as a genre, particularly its assumed teleology that develops from naivety to social integration. Kaz's disrupted development, as evidenced by various characters, questions the linearity and cohesion of maturation.

Conclusion

The analysis of Kaz Brekker in *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom* has demonstrated the plethora of ways in which antiheroism and moral ambiguity can be depicted and perceived. The trauma he endured as a child led him to confront the reality of abandonment and the desperate need for survival in Ketterdam. His enemies shaped his perceptions of cruelty and power. Yet, his crew showed him that there is hope for redemption and safety. By exploring Kaz's source of monstrosity, redeeming and ambiguous qualities, this chapter uncovers how Bardugo contributes to redefining heroism by blurring the binaries of good and evil through contradicting viewpoints, autonomy and trauma. It also demonstrates how Bardugo broadens the definition of the Bildungsroman in Young Adult (YA) fantasy by depicting growth as a never ending journey.

General Conclusion

In the city of Ketterdam, there are no heroes, only abusers and the abused. Growth is not measured by moral resolutions or societal integration but by the necessity to survive, adapt within this morally ambivalent setting, and confront and negotiate fractured identities. This dynamic forms the narrative core of the story, where people like Kaz Brekker are not simply heroes or villains but composites shaped through a multiplicity of voices, divergent ideologies, and deeply rooted traumas.

This dissertation explores how Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom* reframe traditional paradigms of heroism in Young Adult (YA) fantasy through Kaz Brekker's characterisation. At the heart of this exploration is the intersection of polyphony within the evolving Bildungsroman, both of which challenge singular, linear models of growth and moral clarity. Through this reconfiguration, the dissertation inquires into how Kaz Brekker destabilises conventional expectations of protagonist development with his antiheroism and reflects broader shifts in literary representations of youth, agency and identity.

The primary aim is to investigate how the Bildungsroman is subverted in the narrative, how polyphony interferes with individual growth and socialisation in the Victorian Bildungsroman, and how its modernist reconstructions weaponise moral ambiguity in YA fantasy to analyse the ideological and literary implications of Kaz Brekker's antiheroic construction. Through a combination of theoretical and narratological analysis, this research applies M. M. Bakhtin's polyphony and studies the characteristics of the Victorian and the Modernist Bildungsroman and the genre's subversion.

In Young Adult fantasy, polyphony has become a defining structural device. The characterisation of colliding worldviews and moral perspectives makes it difficult for the reader to determine a single moral protagonist. Kaz Brekker, for instance, is feared and respected at once. He is the antihero, not through his amorality but through pragmatism and emotionally

detached actions that veil a disordered moral code. The interplay between polyphony and protagonist constructions in Young Adult (YA) fantasy reshapes the Bildungsroman.

As the genre integrates ethical and ideological multiplicity, the developmental setup associated with the Bildungsroman deviates from linearity and self-realisation. It becomes more about navigating ambiguous motives, negotiating rationality, and surviving trauma. This change is illustrated within Kaz's story as his maturity is based upon his increasing perception of his own vulnerability and susceptibility to compassion and love rather than moral rectitude. This marks out the limits of rage and retaliation. In this context, the protagonist's maturation is about learning to live with contradictions and one's flaws throughout an unfinished journey in pursuit of self-definition and healing. Thus, the Polyphonic Bildungsroman in Young Adult (YA) fantasy reframes heroism in several ways:

First, the characters' developmental arcs significantly deviate from the Victorian Bildungsroman model. Conventionally, stories within the genre follow a single protagonist who takes a path toward maturity and developing moral awareness and acceptance into society. But instead of being bound by society's norms of the city, each creates their own moral definition of what is just. Their model of change is not solitary but collective and punctuated by subjectivity. It is developed through relationships and unresolved ideological struggles.

Second, Bardugo's use of polyphony is not simply a formal device of narration but a thematic and ethical strategy that invites multiple perspectives and centres on all of their storylines. From Inej's faith that holds memories of her lost innocence, Jesper's struggle with belonging, Nina's firm nationalism, Matthias's dogmatic prejudice, and Kaz's pragmatic shield. Then, polyphony encourages continuous ideological dialogism over absolute moral clarity, by portraying growth as a process of balancing conflicting beliefs rather than imposing a single moral stance.

Third, Kaz Brekker does not seek moral transformation or redemption in the traditional sense. His persistent trauma and refusal to reconcile with the corrupt structure that shaped him make him difficult to understand, despite his emotional intimacy with Inej. Also, polyphony underlines his moral ambiguity by allowing the characters to interpret and judge Kaz's actions. Through this persistent ambiguity, heroism is redefined with survival and cynicism, where protagonists like Kaz Brekker are not heroic in a conventional sense but possess the strength to endure fragmentation of the self and ethical uncertainty.

Moreover, this dissertation contributes to literary scholarship in several ways. It adds Bakhtinian theory to Young Adult fantasy and shows how polyphony operates as a stylistic device within a story as well as a mechanism for increasing ethical complexity. By applying the theory to *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, the study shows how polyphony in a story constructs and subverts identity and ethical consistency for its characters.

In addition, it reconceptualises the Bildungsroman as a flexible genre, particularly in Young Adult (YA) fantasy. Drawing on Trites' assertion that adolescent literature reflects society's power structures, this dissertation argues that Kaz's arc reflects his refusal to conform rather than struggle to integrate. His subverted Bildungsroman is not about learning from society but about learning to manipulate and resist it. In doing so, Bardugo presents a character development that resonates with a readership increasingly disillusioned with traditional narratives of success, justice and reconciliation.

Furthermore, this dissertation situates the duology within a growing canon in Young Adult (YA) fantasy. By prioritising collective growth over individual progression, multiplicity of voices over a unified voice, complexity over resolution, and ethical resilience over moral triumph. Through Kaz, the author interrogates the nature of heroism, what it means to survive a corrupt system without being morally broken and whether a character can be both feared and loved, and violent and vulnerable simultaneously. This research contributes to finding answers

to these questions in Young Adult (YA) fantasy and opens space for readers to interpret and discuss the norms of heroism through Kaz Brekker.

In the end, this study posits that the reinvention of heroism in Young Adult fantasy, as characterised by Kaz Brekker, is neither a deprecation of the moral stakes of the Bildungsroman but an escalation of its very applicability. By embracing polyphony, subversion and moral ambiguity, Young Adult (YA) fantasy delves into the intricacies of adolescence and offers narratives that are ethically demanding and emotionally resonant.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The Synopsis of *Six of Crows* (New Book Recommendation).

Kaz Brekker, a notorious criminal, leads the Dregs, a ragtag group of misfits. He operates from the infamous Crow Club, a gambling den in Ketterdam. Kaz's ambition knows no bounds as he plans the most dangerous heist ever envisioned. He needs a crew skilled enough to break into the Ice Court, a fortress that has never been breached. Inside lies Bo Yul-Bayur, a Grisha prisoner with a secret that could shift the power balance in his favor. Each member of the crew has distinct abilities that will play a vital role. However, Kaz knows that any mistake could result in their deaths. What drives Kaz is a thirst for revenge and a desire for wealth. He recruits Inej, known as the Wraith, who can move silently and gather intelligence. Inej carries her own scars, having been a slave before finding freedom. Kaz also teams up with Nina, a charming Grisha Heartrender, Matthias, a heartbroken drüskelle, and two skilled accomplices, Jesper and Wylan. Together, they form an unlikely alliance. Despite their differences, a shared goal binds them. Kaz's cold demeanor hides his motivations. His past is riddled with tragedy and betrayal. All he wants is to take down Pekka Rollins, the man responsible for his brother's death. The crew's mission is fraught with challenges, testing their limitations and revealing hidden loyalties.

Throughout the book, each character's backstory unfolds through captivating flashbacks. The journey to the Ice Court is not just a physical one; it's a reunion with their pasts. Kaz's painful childhood and the death of his brother are central facets of his character. His obsession with revenge drives many of his choices. Inej, with her acrobatic skills, has her own demons, stemming from her experiences as a slave. Learning about her past invites empathy as well as admiration. Nina and Matthias's relationship adds depth and contrasts their histories. Raised to despise each other, their love blooms under dire circumstances. Wylan, burdened by

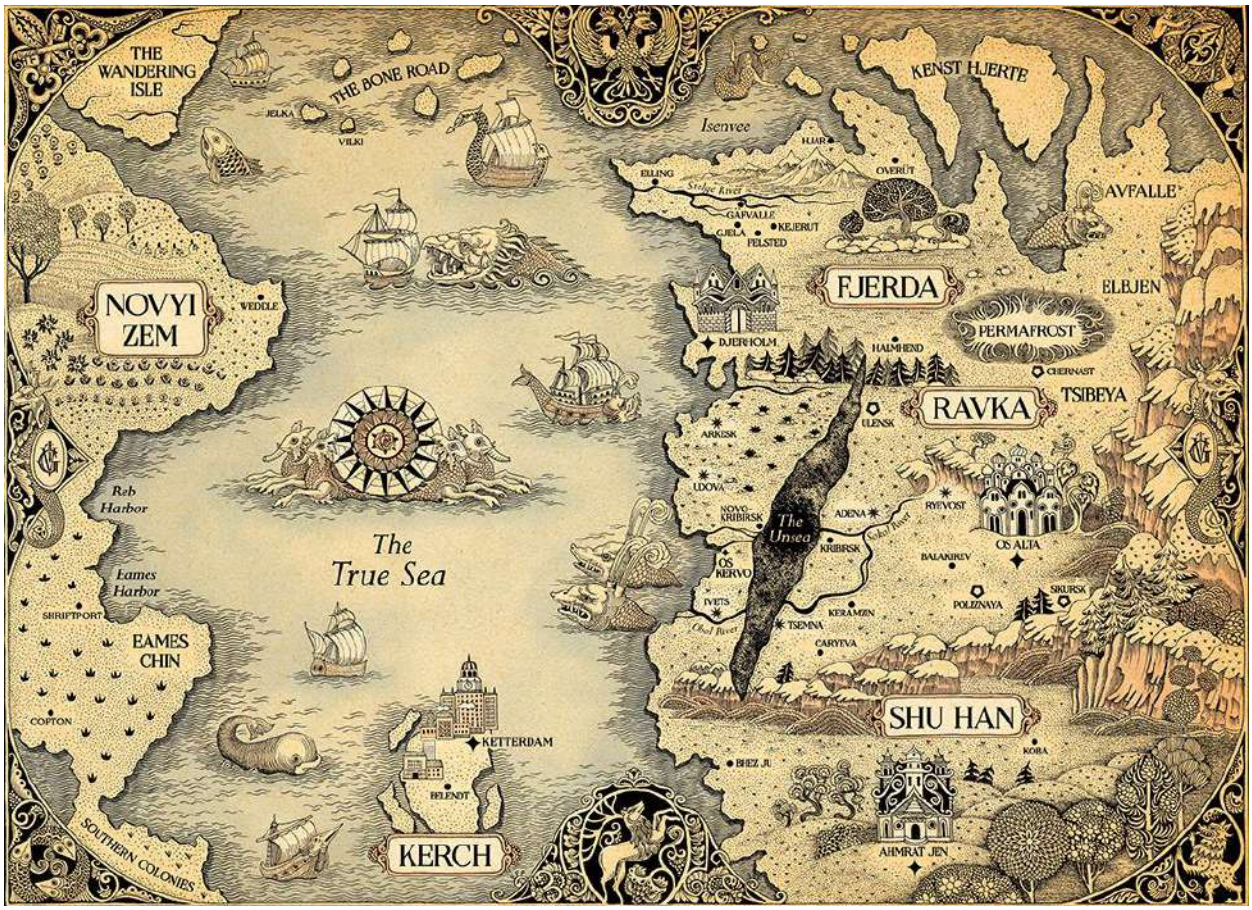
familial expectations, seeks validation and friendship among the crew. Meanwhile, Jesper, with his charm and gambling habits, adds comic relief. The differences among them highlight their struggles, allowing readers to connect with each character. As their mission unfolds, loyalties are tested. Past decisions haunt the crew, creating tension and inner conflict. While focused on the heist, the characters face external threats from rival gangs and personal demons.

Appendix 2: The Synopsis of *Crooked Kingdom* (New Book Recommendation).

In *Crooked Kingdom*, the highly anticipated sequel to *Six of Crows*, readers are reintroduced to Kaz Brekker and his daring crew. Freshly off a heist that pushed their limits, Kaz and company find themselves preparing for a much more dangerous battle. Instead of enjoying their hard-won riches, they are attacked from all sides, struggling to regroup after being double-crossed. Not only are they low on allies and resources, but the stakes have escalated to life and death. Ketterdam becomes the epicenter of conflict as powerful forces vie for the precious secrets behind a drug called jurda parem. This dangerous substance, capable of enhancing Grisha powers, presents challenges that test the fragile loyalties among Kaz's crew. Old antagonists resurface as new threats loom, setting the stage for a gripping saga of revenge, betrayal, and redemption.

As the story unfolds, Kaz's immediate goal becomes clear: to rescue Inej, the Wraith, from Jan Van Eck's clutches before his deadline expires. The crew concocts a plan to outsmart their oppressors, but they soon realize that they are playing a dangerous game. The tension mounts as they attempt to thwart Van Eck's schemes while simultaneously discovering the truth behind Kuwei Yul-Bo and his connection to jurda parem. Each character's perspective adds layers to the plot, providing insights into their motivations. Inej grapples with her own trauma, resilient yet uncertain about her place in the team. Wylan struggles to come to terms with his father's betrayal and his newfound identity. Jesper confronts his gambling addiction while supporting Wylan through emotional turmoil. Kaz Brekker, however, stands at the center of it all, an enigma with layers of vulnerability. Yet, some of his closest allies begin to question his relentless pursuit of revenge. He must learn to balance loyalty with pragmatism, a task easier said than done in their precarious positions. As the clock ticks, they wrestle not just against their enemies but against their inner demons.

Appendix 3: Grishaverse Map Art by Sveta Dorosheva, © 2019 Leigh Bardugo (The Grishaverse).



Appendix 4: Ketterdam Map by Keith Thompson (*Crooked Kingdom*).