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Re-imagining Trujillo: An Interplay of History-Fiction and Power-Violence in *The Feast of the Goat*

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Abstract:

Hailed as a milestone in the genre of the dictator novel, Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* (2001) is a political thriller that portrays the tyrannical regime of General Rafael Trujillo. It is an artistic reconstruction of Trujillo's rise to power, his infamous totalitarianism and finally his murder. The research paper analyses the nexus between history and fiction as an important trope in the novel. Appropriating historical data from numerous biographical accounts and newspapers, the novel re-envision the social psychology, personal motives and the circumstances during 'The Era'. It is important to note that Vargas Llosa deems literature as a forceful mode that reimagines the subtle nuances of the past that history cannot. The paper further explores the connection between power and violence as an inevitable means to political corruption and sexual trafficking of women in dictatorial regimes. Deliberating upon the problematic of power-politics and censorship, the paper analyses the role of the novelist in the reconstruction of the past so as to understand the present and envision a better future.

Keywords: Trujillo, machismo, dictatorship, violence, power, history, reconstruction.

Set in the island state of the Dominican Republic, *The Feast of the Goat* (2001) is Vargas Llosa's second novel after *The War* (1986) that is situated outside Peru. The novel is a political thriller that portrays the tyrannical regime of General Rafael Trujillo who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961. It is therefore a momentous contribution to the genre of the dictator novel. The present paper attempts to view the reconstruction of the 'Trujillo Era' via *The Feast* as a means to question history based on the mechanisms of power. Apart from offering a fine alternative to the official history, Vargas Llosa delineates the physical and psychological trauma that 'the Era' caused to the Dominicans. By integrating fictitious elements in the novel, Vargas Llosa seeks to underline

some hard facts about despotism, political trickery, military intelligence, grilling prison interrogation and sadistic torture events.

Popularly known as ‘the goat’, Trujillo goes down in history as one of the most officious despots to have ruled any Caribbean nation. *The Feast* is an imaginative reconstruction of Trujillo’s ascendancy to power, his notorious authoritarianism and his assassination with its bloody aftermath. The novel opens with a popular Dominican merengue called “They Killed the Goat” which is demonstrative of the assassination of the dictator on the thirtieth of May. He is nicknamed goat in view of the edifice he had built about himself as an atrocious ruler.

The totalitarian rule of the dictator coupled with an unwarranted machismo continued unabated throughout his reign so much so that the wide-ranged reverberations of his supremacy loomed large even after decades of his assassination. Vargas Llosa depicts Trujillo’s horrid obscenity, corruption and dread from close quarters which lends a sense of urgency to his narrative. Gene H. Bell-Villada notes that Vargas Llosa “brilliantly depicts a political system in which sadism has become the ordinary, everyday norm. Yet the book’s pages show not a hint of preachy didacticism” (142). The novel is divided into 24 chapters that narrate multiple plotlines which do not intersect but are held together by the unifying force of the central character i.e. Trujillo. It alternates between two temporal settings; the present day story set in 1996 and the recounting of the events of 1961.

The novel begins with Urania Cabral, who has returned to her homeland in 1996 to visit her ailing father after a long span of thirty-five years. This powerful female voice forms the first axis of the novel that recounts the events of her youth and the reason behind her indifference to her father, Agustin Cabral who was the President of the Senate and the Minister of the Public Works. The next plotline delineates Trujillo’s innermost thoughts and reflections along with his assessment of different ministers of his government and the important historical events that occurred during his time in power. The final axis of the novel belongs to the assassins of the dictator who are waiting for his car to pass in order to kill him in a surprise attack. Sabine Köllmann in *A Companion to Mario Vargas Llosa* notes that *The Feast* is a compelling historical novel because of the characteristic features such as:

A strong social commitment, the dissections of the mechanisms of power, the vivid portrayal of the effects of authoritarianism on the individual, the exposure of the contradictory sides of human

nature, and the questioning of what truth is, all brought together in a perfect equilibrium of narrative structure, technical mastery and an exciting, extraordinary story. (225)

The Dominicans addressed Trujillo by different names such as ‘the Father of the New Nation’, ‘the Benefactor’, ‘the Chief’ and also as ‘the Generalissimo’. This was because a large majority of the population credited him for freeing the Dominican Republic from the perilous infiltration of the Haitians. They also attributed political and economic stability to his being at the helm of affairs. However, all of this came at a price; the Dominicans enjoyed no civil rights and the breaching of individual honour and human rights was commonplace. Commenting on the dynamics of Trujillo’s administration Clive Griffin notes that:

He was one of the most cynical, sanguinary and absurdly histrionic of twentieth-century dictators, creating a police state, terrorizing his subjects through a network of thugs and informers, and accumulating political, legal, military and economic power that turned the Dominican Republic into his and his family’s private fiefdom. Even more sinister was the control his propaganda machine and cult of personality enabled this lethal megalomaniac to exert over the minds of his subjects. (116)

Trujillo’s regime was known as ‘The Era’ which was widely infamous for controlling and manipulating the political as well as the private lives of his citizens and collaborators. Franklin Knight observes that “Trujillo completely dominated the state in every way, providing a modicum of social and economic reforms at the expense of human and political rights” (224). Surprisingly, the inner circle of the government that consisted of his ministers was also kept under close scrutiny. They could not escape the dictator’s grasp and were frequently asked to prove their loyalty to the Chief by fulfilling his morally repulsive demands. His inhumane sexual violation of a fourteen year old Urania is symbolic of the widespread victimization of the Dominicans by a corrupt regime.

When Urania returns to her native place she is forty-nine years old. She is a successful lawyer based in New York who has repressed the horrors of her past by working tirelessly so that her mind is occupied and she has no time to dwell over her past. During her long stay in the United States she does not correspond with her father or her aunt. She never answers their letters. More than the dread that the despicable predicament evoked in her, it was the shock she suffered when she learned that her father who was stripped of his official ranks had connived with Manuel Alfonso to present his only daughter to the Chief in order to regain his goodwill. Many years later when Urania returns, her father is crippled and

mute as a result of a stroke. He can only hear her and so she reminds him of all the distressing things that happened in the year 1961:

Not a single day in thirty-five years, Papa. I never forgot and I never forgave you. That's why when you called me at Siena Heights or at Harvard, I would hear your voice and hang up and not let you finish. "Uranita, is that you ... ?" Click. "Uranita, listen to me ..." Click. That's why I never answered any of your letters. Did you write a hundred? Two hundred ? I tore them all up or burned them. Pretty hypocritical, those little notes of yours. You always talked in circles, in allusions, in case other eyes saw them, in case other people learned the story. Do you know why I could never forgive you? Because you were never really sorry. After so many years of serving the Chief, you had lost your scruples, your sensitivity, the slightest hint of rectitude. Just like your colleagues. Just like the whole country, perhaps. Was that a requirement for staying in power and not dying of disgust? To become heartless, a monster like your Chief. To be unfeeling and self-satisfied, like the handsome Ramfis after raping Rosalía and leaving her to bleed in the doorway of Marion Hospital. (Vargas Llosa 120)

After suffering the humiliation she goes to Santo Domingo Academy instead of her home and a few days after the incident she leaves the country, her grant of scholarship and all the necessary formalities are facilitated by the nuns of the academy. However, throughout her life Urania is unable to convalesce from the frightful memories of her past. Even after thirty-five years she is traumatized when she remembers her rendezvous with the Chief and the indignity she had suffered on that fateful night. She tells her aunt that she remembers everything about the night; from the colour of the clothes everyone was wearing to their behavior. She remembers how her father didn't look her in the eye while saying goodbye as she was leaving to meet the Chief. Although the Cabral family in the novel is by and large a fictitious strand running in an otherwise historical novel but the practice of sacrificing the innocence of little girls for gaining political favor from the dictator was a custom in the Trujillo government. The historical documents ratifying this vile ordinance throws light on the acts of moral turpitude and the depths of degeneracy and perversion that the regime had sunk into. This representation must be read in the context of the statement made by White in his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* that:

The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable. (98)

The second storyline of the novel is set in 1961 and revolves around Trujillo's last days in power and more so reflects largely upon the day of his assassination. Vargas Llosa deliberates upon important events such as the Cold War, the Haitian Massacre of 1937, and the assassination attempt on the Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt. The reader gains an insight about Trujillo's fascist convictions, his failing health and above all his private chagrins. He acknowledges his crimes against humanity by saying that "My hand does not tremble when I have to kill Governing sometimes demands that you become stained with blood. I've often had to do that for this country" (Vargas Llosa 103). The second chapter of the novel opens with the dictator waking up from his sleep and reminiscing about his heydays in power. He had trained with the U.S. Marines and risen through the ranks to become the head of the army and the state with the help of the United States. Here, it is important to note that Vargas Llosa is concentrating on both the political violence of the Trujillo establishment and the interference of the United States in Latin American politics as a powerful policy of neo-colonial supremacy. Vargas Llosa shows Trujillo advancing the infrastructural development of the country and engaging the brilliant minds of the country to aid his governance. Moira Fradinger in her *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins* observes:

In the necropolitical center of the novel, Vargas Llosa explores not the power of one man but the power that lies in the structure of an exception to the law. Trujillo is structurally located in a zone of indetermination between law and violence, which, from the perspective of the law, is the "wild zone" of power unveiling a split within the law. From the perspective of the state, it produces decisions having the force of law, wrapped in the fictions of survival ("reasons of state") that protect any power able to identify a threat to its existence.... This logic of survival might be considered representative of power's consciousness of its historical nature; that is, these "reasons" respond to the ultimate threat of time—embodied in the presence of the threatening other. Vargas Llosa's historical Trujillo dwells in this space: in the historical despair of the exception of sovereign power, assailed by the consciousness of its rise and fall. (199)

He proclaimed himself as the Father of the New Nation, so much so that during his leadership, Santo Domingo was renamed Ciudad Trujillo. In order to teach a lesson to the Haitians infiltrating into the Dominican Republic he commanded their massacre and the number of people dead was never clearly known. The novel plays upon the idea of true historical records by mentioning different

facts and figures of the Haitian massacre. Concurrently, Trujillo supervises all means and agencies of information, thus manipulating truth to maintain the status quo.

The insidious abrasion of justice and individual liberties in Trujillo's sovereignty were orchestrated by Colonel Johnny Abbes García, the head of the SIM (Military Intelligence Service). The SIM interrogated people mercilessly; the freethinkers and nonconformists were often killed in cold blood and thrown to the sharks alive. Colonel Abbes Garcia was ruthless and sadistic; he was in charge of all the ghastly acts such as murders, tortures, enforced disappearances and espionage. However, he was valuable for the dictator in more than one way. Firstly, he eliminated the dissidents and the enemies of the regime effortlessly and secondly "everything bad [was] attributed to him and only the good to Trujillo" (Vargas Llosa 44). Trujillo's sustained control over the Dominican Republic was also backed by the United States and he measured himself as a "bulwark of anti-communism, the best ally of the United States" (17). Nonetheless, the state of affairs did not remain the same after the Cuban Revolution. Owing to the brutal subjugation of the dissidents both at home and abroad, the hostility of the regime with the Church and most importantly the assassination attempt on Rómulo Betancourt led the OAS to put debilitating economic sanctions on the Dominican government.

Vargas Llosa devotes the third plotline of the novel to the assassination stratagems devised by the conspirators. The bunch of schemers team up to put an end to the dictator's dominion over the Dominican Republic. Each of these assassins was a former Trujillista and had a sound reason to kill the tyrant. Vargas Llosa fittingly demonstrates the impetus behind their plot by recounting their past lives and the pain and horror that the dictator had inflicted on them. The principal conspirators are Antonio Imbert Barrera, Antonio de la Maza, Amado García Guerrero popularly called 'Amadito' and Salvador Estrella Sadhalá known as the 'Turk'. All of them waited in a chevrolet on way to San Cristóbal to ambush him and some distance away Pedro Livio Cedeño and Huáscar Tejeda waited in a car lent by the Turk. The plan of the assassins "was to cut Trujillo off, and in a barrage of fire from the front and the rear, leave him no escape" (89). Amadito had to give up his dreams of marrying his beloved Luisa Gil because her brother was one of the June 14 subversives.

June 14 was a clandestine movement backed by Fidel Castro to overthrow Trujillo. Amadito had severed all his ties with Luisa Gil but he was further pushed by Trujillo's henchmen to kill a young man who happened to be Luisa Gil's brother. Later when he was apprised of the situation he was disenchanted with the regime. On the other hand, Antonio de la Maza's brother Tavito was a "convinced

Trujillista, one of those who thought of the Chief as a superior being. They often argued about it, because it irritated Antonio when his younger brother repeated, like a refrain, that Trujillo was heaven's gift to the Republic" (95). Tavito de la Maza was incriminated in a murder and consequently killed and to avenge his murder Antonio joined the rest of the conspirators. Their friend, Turk on the other hand had different reasons to join them in this conspiracy. Being a God-fearing Catholic he had discussed this matter with his spiritual advisor who put him in touch with Monsignor Lino Zanini, the papal nuncio who justified the act of tyrannicide by quoting St. Thomas Aquinas who in *Summa Theologica* said that "God looks with favor upon the physical elimination of the Beast if a people is freed thereby" (Vargas Llosa 219). For the Turk, Trujillo's leadership was toxic because he deprived people of their free will which was given to them by the Almighty God. He also wanted to avenge the Mirabal sisters whom Trujillo killed for their involvement in the June 14 movement. He observes that:

It was the fault of the beast that so many Dominicans turned to whores, drinking binges, and other dissipations in order to ease their anguish at leading a life without a shred of liberty or dignity, in a country where human life was worth nothing. Trujillo had been one of Satan's most effective allies. (222)

However, with the elimination of the dictator, the first level of the conspiracy is materialized but the ensuing steps that were necessary for the eradication of the Trujillo regime go awry. This was because of General Pupo Román, the Minister of the Armed Forces who had failed to institute the civilian-military junta after Trujillo's execution. Although the General was dead but the atmosphere of foreboding loomed large in the Dominican Republic. Ramfis Trujillo, the General's son wreaked havoc in the country and hunted down the conspirators. Along with Colonel García Abbes, Ramfis inflicted tremendous torture on the conspirators. Amadito and Antonio de la Maza preferred to fight the dictator's forces and lose their lives in this process rather than surrendering to them. After six months of their hiding Antonio Imbert and Luis Amiama were received as three-star generals in the nation's army for their valiant efforts and indomitable spirit. In his observation of the structure of the novel, Bell-Villada notes the complexity of the narrative:

It is this intricacy of design that makes *The Feast of the Goat* both a compelling read and a satisfying artistic experience. I would further argue, moreover, that the strict geometric framework of Vargas Llosa's novel furnishes for its torture episodes a key prop and scaffold that renders more bearable their inhuman evils, saves those chapters from degenerating into a catalog of horrors. (147)

Vargas Llosa very adeptly customizes the chronology of the historical events to suit his narrative. For instance, in the historical event General Pupo Román was not arrested soon after the Chief's assassination the way the novelist chronicles it and even when the tyrant is dead, the novelist brings him back in the sections that recount Urania's assault. The contradistinction between the real time of the physical realm and the virtual time in the narrative does not however nullify its importance as a historical fiction. David Wood in *The Deconstruction of Time* notes:

What is critical is that the order of actions can be quite different from the *order of events*. A narrative may begin with the death of the hero and set itself the (retrospective) task of tracing how that happened.... The usual way of describing the order of events is to talk of their "real" chronological order. It is assumed that however subtle the internal temporality of a text, it nonetheless projects (and rests on) a "real time" beyond itself. A flashback requires a "real past" to flash back to. (356)

In the last chapters of the novel, all the plotlines converge. Dr. Joaquín Balaguer, the titular president of the Trujillo government held sway after the dictator's death. Towards the end, he becomes a significant figure in the novel as well. Dr. Balaguer's motto in life was to receive and confront any situation of crisis with equanimity. To initiate a fresh relationship with the United States and stabilize the political conditions in the country, he exiled the notorious head of the SIM, Colonel García Abbes. Through a series of Machiavellian scheming he manipulated Ramfis Trujillo and persuaded him to leave the country along with his family. Ciudad Trujillo was renamed Santo Domingo along with all the streets, squares, buildings and parks that were named after the chief or his family members. Additionally, in order to have the sanctions lifted by the OAS, he delivered speeches wherein he established himself as a democrat and lambasted Trujillo dictatorship for severely curtailing human rights:

In that brief time, he had transformed himself from a puppet president, a nonentity, into an authentic Head of State, an office recognized by all factions, and, in particular, by the United States. They had been hesitant at first, but after he explained his plans to the new consul, they now took more seriously his promise to move the country gradually toward full democracy while maintaining order and not allowing any advantage to the Communists. (Vargas Llosa 425)

The novel strictly adheres to the historical setting and personages of the 1960s era. However, the imaginative reconstruction of the multifarious persona of Rafael Trujillo is what pushes the frontiers

of this historical fiction. The novel espouses the position that history is not necessarily governed by causality and logic but by chance events. Rafael Trujillo, Dr. Balaguer and the assassins are all historical characters. However, their thoughts and speculations are invented. Even if Vargas Llosa blended fact with fiction and introduced some fictitious characters, they are still reminiscent of some historical characters. A perfect example of this is Henry Chirinos who is roughly based on Peruvian lawyer and politician Enrique Chirinos who was a representative member of the Fujimori dictatorship in Peru. Thus, Vargas Llosa astutely draws significant parallels between the Trujillo and the Fujimori leadership. It was Fujimori against whom Vargas Llosa lost his presidential elections of 1990. It is noteworthy that a certain school of critics have accused Vargas Llosa of misrepresenting history and some on the other hand have criticized him “of lifting too much detail from his sources or following historical reality so closely that in places it resembled a mere chronicle” (Köllmann 227). However, Vargas Llosa in one of his interviews comments that the novel adheres to the crucial facts of history but is not a history book and even conceded that he had exercised artistic liberties. He spells out his own theory on historical fiction:

When it comes to writing historical fiction, I have little time for what one might call ‘archaeological’ novels, that is, novels which seek to do more than recreate or reconstruct the past as it was. No, I prefer to view the past from the perspective of the present, in order to see how it has helped shape the present and assess the degree to which it continues to affect it. (qtd. in Griffin 117)

This is exemplified in the novel through the character of Urania who is traumatized for life. She tells her cousin that her father and Trujillo had turned her into a desert. In the entire novel Vargas Llosa meticulously hints at the tragedy that befalls Urania and forces the reader to make speculations on the nature of past events. It is only in the last chapter that the readers are informed about the shameful plan and its far-reaching consequences “Urania is thus the metaphor for the truth of the written text of history, albeit obtained through violence” (Fradinger 235). She interrogates her mute father with disturbing facts and questions the appalling machinations of the Trujillo administration and finally comes to terms with:

How so many millions of people, crushed by propaganda and lack of information, brutalized by indoctrination and isolation, deprived of free will and even curiosity by fear and the habit of servility and obsequiousness, could worship Trujillo. Not merely fear him but love him, as children eventually love authoritarian parents, convincing themselves that the whippings and beatings are for their own good.

But what you've never understood is how the best-educated Dominicans, the intellectuals of the country, the lawyers, doctors, engineers, often graduates of very good universities in the United States or Europe, sensitive, cultivated men of experience, wide reading, ideas, presumably possessing a highly developed sense of the ridiculous, men of feeling and scruples, could allow themselves to be as savagely abused ... 'Was it worth it, Papa? Was it for the illusion that you were wielding power? Sometimes I think it wasn't, that success was secondary. That you, Arala, Pichardo, Chirinos, Alvarez Pina, Manuel Alfonso, really liked getting dirty. That Trujillo pulled a vocation for masochism up from the bottom of your souls, that you were people who needed to be spat on and mistreated and debased in order to be fulfilled.' (Vargas Llosa 63-64)

In the final passages of the novel, the writer throws light on Urania's niece Marianita who knows nothing about the Trujillo era as opposed to Urania who is a self-acknowledged expert on 'The Era'. Urania's shocking revelation of the Trujillo administration becomes a significant tool of information through which the new generation (here Marianita) is advised on how the past shapes the future. The novel discerns the past through the prism of the present; this is especially true of chapters dealing with Urania. Thus, it is deemed important to remember the past so that the future generations take note and refrain from diving into the same fallacies.

Vargas Llosa moulds the novel into a tense psychological thriller by underscoring the individual motives, circumstances and the mental state of characters behind every action. According to Raymond Gonzáles "The successful political novelist is the one who selects the appropriate style to express the content in as close a balance between form and theme as he can achieve" (110). In this case, Vargas Llosa ably depicts the historical ruler in a realist mode to demystify him. By showcasing the inner-self of the characters, the novelist ably brings home the notion of internalization on the part of the Dominicans which led to the perpetuation of the Trujillo regime. In his essay "The Truth of Lies" Vargas Llosa observes that it is the social psychology that gives an impetus to the events of historical significance and it is literature which captures these nuances of a phenomenon more accurately than history proper:

Successful fiction embodies the subjectivity of an epoch and for that reason, although compared to history novels lie, they communicate to us fleeting and evanescent truths which always escape scientific descriptions of reality. Only literature has the techniques and power to distill this delicate elixir of life: the truth hidden in the heart of human lies. (327)

The physical violence imposed on the traitors of the regime and the sexual violence inflicted on Urania could be seen in consonance with Hannah Arendt's philosophical treatise that she developed in the 1960s and 1970s, coincidentally during the period of Trujillo's assassination and its bloody aftermath. Arendt observes that in the political arena, power and violence are used synonymously when in fact they are diametrically opposite to each other. According to her, it is violence that flows from the barrel of the gun and not power. It is the lack of power that breeds violence, clearly then, this projection of violence is seen in sections delineating the torture that is foisted on the traitors of the regime. The maniacal aftermath of the General's political execution is suggestive of Arendt's observation. It is only after their anchor is lost and they are bereft of power that they wreak vengeance in the country. In order to achieve an end they unleash vicious policies to hold onto their dwindling power.

From what has been established here, one can surmise that Vargas Llosa has adeptly used the character of Urania to challenge the authority of a mighty dictator. It is through the power of the oral narrative and storytelling that a new stance on Trujillo and his strongmen is established. Further, the growing relationship between Urania and Marianita can be read as a potent metaphor for the present and future generations wherein the latter is taught about the horrors of the past in a new critical light. It is this enlightenment that becomes essential in the reconstruction of the past and contests the dominant structures of power. In his attempt to reconstruct the past, Vargas Llosa has also commented on the present. Trujillo in the novel not only symbolizes the historical persona of the Dominican dictator named Rafael Trujillo but also exemplifies the traits of several other despots of Latin America and the totalitarian regimes from world over.

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