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Construction of the Romanian Society in Herta Muller's *The Passport*: A Marxist Analysis

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Abstract:

Herta Muller, in *The Passport*, explores the history of Romania and rewrites it in a way that her characters clearly portray the repressed life of Romanian people within a society where money is recognized as God and human beings are presented as objects. Muller's attempt to represent the socio-political scenario of Romania and the hollowness of society proves efficacious in revamping one's ideology which was firstly adopted by willingness. The concept of ideology is guided by the bourgeoisie ideology which helps in constructing the base and superstructure of a society in *The Passport*. The study highlights Muller's questioning about the hollowness of society's base and superstructure resultant of totalitarianism; a devastating force to crush common man's life in *The Passport*.

Keywords: Base, Ideology, Super-Structure.

Introduction

Romania remained under the rule of communism for a considerable time period (1965-1989). The aftermaths of this critical time period are left engraved on Romanian people's psyche in such a manner that they are still unable to forget their sufferings which they witnessed under Ceausescu's dictatorship who ruled Romania with all his atrocities. Carey (2004) states "there is not a single Romanian adult who has not been affected by some form of collaboration with Communism" (p.277). The socio-political circumstances have been so miserable and pathetic that people used to live hand to mouth. They have been exploited in the name of dictatorship which must not be called the dictatorship of a party but the despotism of a group consisted of a few people who worked under the umbrella of securitate: a secret Romanian police. After two World Wars, situation became more formidable which enhanced the socio-political turmoil in Romania. Many leaders came to rule Romania and she passed through various stages of progress and deterioration but there was one unforgettable period which still has its marks on the psyche and life of people for

ages to come. Under Ceausescu's era Romania was presenting the picture of a hell on earth because of the social and political turmoil in every nook and corner of the country.

Roper (2005) explains that the history of repression in Romania started by Gheorghiu-Dej in 1950s and went to the extremes under Ceausescu's regime in 1960s which is also called the era of constraints and oppression. It has also been regarded the most labyrinthine and troublesome period for Romanians. Ceausescu has not only manipulated political maneuvers with great skill but also juggled the economy of Romania. Firstly he induced a secret police, the securitate and then gave it the charge of controlling all the spheres of life in Romania. Ceausescu believed in spying the people. His police worked as eavesdroppers and he curbed all types of agitation against him. People were not allowed to sit in groups and if someone was heard of speaking ill against Ceausescu or even against the securitate he was sentenced to death promptly. Therefore people were kept under strong vigil by the government from raising their voice against Communism and dictatorship. The People in power had imposed their own jurisdiction on the masses by taking peculiar advantages and exclusive privileges.

Authority made blatant use of Force to extract blind obedience from the masses to Communism. A rustic piece of land was converted to a modern and mechanical state by employing the values of communism. On the other hand people were forced to accept whatever was presented to them without raising any single objection and it was impossible for Romanians to live their lives into a lean and fragile society which deprived them from the rights of living a satisfactory life.

Historical Background of the Study

Woodfin and Zarate (2004) are of the opinion that Marx begins his book *Communist Manifesto* with the idea that: "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of the class struggle" (p. 38). As society is divided into two different classes: one who enjoys everything to whom Marx called Bourgeoisies who also fall under the category of haves and the others whom he called Proletariats who stand as haves not. The Marxists rationalize this division of society among classes as a record of endeavor by the Bourgeoisies to maintain their superiority. This is also called a struggle to gain material superiority and get as much chances as possible to maintain that superiority because this material superiority allows them to impose their ideology on the working class. In fact it becomes a struggle of the finest civilization. They further say "Society must increasingly become polarized between a shrinking capitalist class and a massive proletariat that suffers worsening misery" (p. 57).

Terry Eagleton (2006) says to comprehend the creed and system of a capitalist society, it is very important to understand the relation within different strata of society. "To understand an ideology, we must analyse the precise relations between different classes in a society; and to do that means grasping where those classes stand in relation to the mode of production" (p. 3).

Eagleton (2006) says Marxism is basically a study of human societies and above all it is a scientific theory. It has become a practice to transform the structures of societies across the

world. It throws light on the pertinent role of Marxism being played in any given society, which is to high light the struggle of men and women to free themselves from the clutches of exploitation and oppression at the hands of their high ups. This struggle is not based on superficial grounds rather it is essential part of many social structures because it belongs to bitter fact of real life

Discussion/Analysis

The Passport was Muller's third novel which was published in Berlin. Through her writing she raised socio-political issues of Romanian society. With her poetic diction she caught the attention of the readers while providing a peep into the world of Romania under the ruthless effects of dictatorship and communism. *The Passport* is a story of a man who is in dire need of having the passport so that he can flee from the suffocated atmosphere of Romania. This novel is basically a satire on the stratification of the society where Proletariat was guided by Bourgeoisie's ideology and human beings were used as commodities. Muller's work unveils the socio-political condition of Romanian society. Through her characters Muller exhibits the politics of Romania which do not only affect the society but it takes the society on the verge of destruction. She exhibits the hollowness of society by focusing on the social issues where human beings were turned into tools for accumulating wealth because materialism hovered above the country. People's consciousness was only guided by money and they were not given freedom to raise their voice against socio-political instabilities of Romanian society. Thus by raising these issues of Romanian society, this research analyzes the life in Romania from Marxist point of view.

Base for living a satiated life

As Marx and Engels wanted to create a society where all people would get equal rights and there would be no confinement among the classes but Muller, by negating that point, raises her voice while introducing two sections of society in the very novella *The Passport*. Most of her characters belong to the working class who work very hard for earning the money as they are living in a materialistic society where money rules every sphere of life. They are being exploited by the ones who are in power. As money is a base according to which a man is categorized similarly it also categorizes how much freedom a man can have?

As Windisch is a miller and he has a shortage of money. He faces lots of complexities in getting passports because he does not have the money so he had to give 12 deliveries of flour previously to the city mayor. "Windisch carries the sack with his hands and with his knees. He leans it against the wall of the mill". (p.08) He reminds himself again and again that he has to give meal of grain. "I'll wind it up, till the spring snaps". (p.08) But this continuous process of providing the flour to Mayor left Windisch and his family with a voracious appetite.

In the very novella money is the base and the quantity or amount of having the money categorize the status of people that where do they socially stand among different stratum of society. As Williams says "The base is a real social existence of a man. (1977, p.81) Apparently and in civilized manner man thinks that he respects his religion, his social

institutions, his social commitments and his familiar relations more but in reality and in satirical terms the man actually socializes himself according to his needs and his basic need is money. Thus a man is a social animal and his all social activities are bound with his monetary possessions. He treats and is being treated on the base of economy.

Base and superstructure are correlated terms and both depend on each other. Issuance of Romanian passport serves as a pretext for earning hush money through which exploiters fulfill their illegal and legal desires in *The Passport*. While getting a passport for the Romanians is an innocent outlook of having easy ways of getting money and escaping the hazardous life under Ceausescu's totalitarian regime and of earning money abroad. A Romanian always thinks that in his own country his poor and downtrodden ways of living will never be upgraded. Their desires, aspirations and luxuries can only be achieved when they will be having the passport. Whereas for the Bourgeoisie and hegemonizing behavior of the securitate use the provision of the passport for masses as a mean for maintaining the hegemony. And on this base they can construct, reconstruct and deconstruct their superstructure.

Consequently base is a fundamental principal of everything because it provides a solid reason to stand for. Every society's base is different but Romanian society is based on money because Ceausescu himself was a lover of capital so he infused the same thinking in his people that everyone was possessed by money.

Super Structural territories

As money works as a base of Romanian society and it guides all the spheres of life. Ones who are in power because of money they manipulate other people and control all territories of society. People are treated according to their financial status. Williams (1977) cites Marx's view "Upon the several forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, a whole superstructure is reared of various and peculiarly shaped feelings (illusions, habits of thought and conceptions of life.)". (p. 76)

By presenting superstructure as a matter of fact or by presenting it as a part of the culture or rituals to those for whom they had devised this system. Elite class forms all these things on monetary conditions as well as on the social conditions. Wage earning class maintains their existence in misapprehension that they are living their lives but in reality they are not as Muller exhibits in the concerning novella that people use to live in the restricted atmosphere of Romania and they transfer the thoughts in the other generation as Amalie guides the students about Romania that the land of Romania belong to them because it's a land of their father she further says:

Every child has its parents. Just as the father in the house in which we live is our father, so Comrade Nicolae Ceausescu is the father of our country. And just as the mother in the house in which we live is our mother, so Comrade Elena Ceausescu is the mother of all the children. All the children love comrade Nicolae and comrade Elena, because they are their parents.(p.51)

What Muller wants, is to emphasize the destructive thinking patterns infused by the state. Moreover it is a critique on the way the whole society and the social institutions have been set up. It is probing into the very controversial idea that the whole society is nothing but a con game, everything is monopolized. Even the seemingly innocent and ordinary everyday things (such as a teacher presents Ceausescu as a father in front of her young pupils) are contingent because being a mentor it is Amalie's responsibility to instill her thinking in her pupils' minds so that they will remain part of that very system of which she herself is a part. Another important point which is also made here is the codependent relationship of the state and the masses. In order to rule with an iron grip the state needs the masses to go on living under their command unquestioningly and the best way to curb away any possibility of resistance or reaction they need to get at them psychologically, which in the longer run is much more disastrous than any material limitations placed upon them.

And if that is the case than the public institutions for education, for religious regulations are one big farce nothing but another method for leading the people to their own annihilation.

This impact on a psychological level is apparent in the heavily symbolic language of the work. It has now been affirmed that human beings tend to function and communicate individually, on a personal level, and with the world at large through a set of symbols. "...we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend..." (Jung, 1964, p.4). As is demonstrated in the novella all the recurring symbols have been attached with negative attributes. The owl a sign of wisdom and regeneration is recognized by the towns folk to mean only death. Skinner's hobby of stuffing the owls is therefore doubly symbolic firstly it represents the ruling state's stance towards the masses. Like Skinner they too feed them for profit and then subjugate them to a catatonic state so that they too are just like Skinner's stuffed owls. Apparently normal but having all signs of life removed from them. "He fed the owls with lizards and toads. When they were fully grown, he killed them. He hollowed them out. He put them in slaked lime. He dried them and stuffed them" (p.33). Secondly Skinner's act of stuffing these owls may have been his attempt at making them eternal to cease the dying process that they have been faced by since before the war and that hadn't stopped even when the war is "officially" over.

Similarly the color white stands for the way the materialistic world divides itself. Everything is either black or white, no grey colored areas are allowed. The rich are "the rich" the poor remain "the poor." Perhaps for these reasons the color white too, that is more commonly known for innocence, purity, new beginnings, is presented here in its downbeat element. A color of death and mourning in many cultures, here it is in addition perceived as being bare, isolating and cold. The feelings it stirs in the villagers are those of apathy, detachment and sterility. It acts as being too pristine and immaculate, making the villagers feel as though they can't make a move for fear of upsetting it (the established order) or creating a mess. As is made explicit in the scene where the joiner's mother cuts the white Dahlia. Nobody knows or understands why she cut the flower but perhaps it is her final attempt at cutting off the passive white, juxtaposed in this scenario with a red melon. Red that stands for aggressive force which is not always positive but something that in her

desperate condition have may seemed like the only plausible option. As she says "...This summer is throwing out the fire of many years. Only the melon cools me down." (18)

The name of the protagonist Windisch is highly symbolic as well. Wind in symbolic terms represents the spirit, the life force. Windisch on these standards would come to mean 'wind-like.' Wind is also something that has many appearances and facets. The task at hand then is not to be something else but to use your potential to the fullest. "There isn't any wind," he (Windisch) says. The night watchman holds a finger in the air: "There's always wind, even if one doesn't feel it." (82) it is made apparent by this remark of Windisch that harnessing his potential is one thing he is not even aware of.

These are only few examples from the profound symbolism that Muller incorporates in her work. But even these reveal the extent to which these individuals and communities have been brainwashed. Their minds are closed off to any possibilities, of change, of better living conditions, of asking for what is rightfully theirs. As Bernays (1928) states that the most notable point of egalitarian society is the way through which they deploy the behaviors and views of people through proper sensibility. By remaining in a disguise, ruling strata of the society guides the apparatuses because in reality this reigning class manipulates the other people. People are controlled and guided by those who are hidden and by remaining out of sight they set a criteria for every living being and through this controlled way our society or system moves on. For the effective working of society it is necessary that people should follow this pattern. Large groups of people are conducted in every sphere of their lives by those who are less in number because they understand those people to that extent where they cannot understand themselves. They control them by just a light tug.

Ceausescu believed that as he is the father of Romania so all the lands and folks belong to him even it was decided by him that what type of crop will be grown in the fields. He took the lands from the people and subjugated them. As two people came to Windisch's wife and after counting the hens they took them away. She further added "They went into the garden in rubber boots. They saw the clover in front of the barn. Next year we'll have to grow sugar-beet there, they said."(p.57) that he took hold of the agricultural matters.

Religion is a tool for the refinement of the people but here in the novella the gate of the church was locked and no one took the initiative for the guidance of others. Rather than fulfilling its sole purpose of the betterment of people here religion is also used as a crushing tool. In the novella, poverty and religion goes side by side. People have nothing to offer rather than their bodies, so poverty stands as an advantage for the priest because poverty categorizes the standard of morality in Romania as income level of Romanians are low similarly religion is nowhere among the Romanians.

Windisch says "I wanted to go into the church and pray. The church was locked. I thought that was a bad sign. Saint Anthony is on the other side of the door. His thick book is brown. It's like a passport." (p.58). Muller shows the importance of the passports in Romanians' lives that they see it in every institute or every module or every facet of their life.

As Windisch saw that priest was holding the book which was quite similar to the passport which he wanted to get and that passport works as a crushing tool which is withheld by reformers. Instead of using it for the reformation of people they are using it for exploitation.

Ideological beliefs of Romanian People

Throughout the history of Marxism, stratification of society is the hot issue of discussion. Marxists want to develop a society which is free from divisions but paradoxically they were unable to do that. Ideology is basically a set of fabricated-combined dogmas that is used as a clarification to rationalize the social institutions and philosophies and it is presented in such a way that there is no way out for the people to question it but they have to accept it by assent.

Through her characters' miserable conditions and the acceptance of the ways for the survival and existence Muller shows the effects of ideology in guiding the lives and social paranoia of society. Through the symbols and metaphors of natural objects Muller exhibits the consent and submission of people and their strong beliefs in Bourgeoisie' ideology imposed on them without their full consciousness of the fact.

Social equilibrium does not exist and people are being treated according to their economic status. Everyone feels solace by seeing the other man in danger because they become senseless towards other man's feelings. As the concept of equivalence is diminishing similarly people are dying in the village of Romania. "Her smile stretches from the death of the white Dahlia to the death of widow Kroner" (p.43). Oppressors do not bother that what type of life people are living and they exploit them through their set of beliefs and ideas. Their ideology controls the thinking of proletariat class that it does not only affect the natural scenario but it also makes the lives of human beings' pathetic.

Muller further explains through the narrative that before the war everyone was waiting at the station for the king to come. When train came everyone was very excited that king would meet them but a man said from the window of the train "Silence. His majesty The King is sleeping" (p.49). It symbolizes that government did not care about the ongoing phenomena of country and busy in taking the personal benefits.

Ideology is based on the socio-political elements of Romanian society and when political instability is there in the country, people will not feel satisfaction with the current conditions and a stage comes when rather than resisting against the situation they accept whatever is presented to them.

Muller also uses glass as a symbol of the acceptance of ideology as by considering it as a vision people transfer it from one person to another. "Rudi gave the man all the glass objects he had in his flat. Glass flower pots. Combs. A rocking chair of blue glass. Glass cups and plates. Glass pictures". (p.38) It shows that they have accepted whatever is presented to them. By using "the tear" as a symbol, Muller explains the hollowness of Bourgeoisie's ideology. As firstly "the tear is empty. Fill it with water. Preferably with rain

water”. (p.23) that Bourgeois class occupies the minds of the wage earning class they imbue their own beliefs in them and they admit it without inquiring it. In short Muller illustrates that the given ideology is nothing but only a way to manipulate and misguide the other people about the whole scenario by snatching the power of logic and reason from them. Muller is successful in showing the success of the ideology makers through her characters who lead their lives according to the given dogmas by accepting them as a matter of their daily routine.

Results:

In a Totalitarian society a man is always in a grip of hostile forces which control his thoughts and even his reasons of living in the world. He is controlled sometimes in the names of livelihood and sometimes in the name of the fulfilment of his desires. His whole life is about a struggle sometimes he strives hard for getting the status and respect or sometimes he accepts everything without interrogating it. And in raising his social and economic status history plays an important role. As by providing a dictatorial background to the novella Muller pays heed on the history of class struggle which Romanian people were doing to get rid from the hostile circumstances of Romania. Herta Muller's *The Passport* is a Marxian novel which, on one hand, does not only depict the concavity of Romanian society but on the other hand also demonstrates the insignificance of human beings in this transitory and materialistic world. She reveals through her characters that Marxists' dream to build a classless society ends when because of social stratification of haves and have not. People suffer and their lives are at stakes. Either only money or a female body, in exchange of it, is of worth to get a passport; that becomes a symbol of human freedom from the totalitarian regime of Ceausescu.

For colonization there is no need of physical presence only in some country but by snatching the power of thinking or questioning from people a territory can be subjugated as well. In the era of Ceausescu Romanians were tamed to accept whatever was kept in front of them. Their acceptance of the rules and system made them devoid of feelings for other even turned them into animals that can eat their children to avoid starvation. Similarly Windish like other male members of Romanian society uses his beloved one in the time of need. Not only female bodies but religion is also used in Romanian society as a tool for creating the insensitiveness among folks. Religion was molded by Bourgeoisie so that people could not question anything and was also used as a tool for strengthening the belief that they will get the reward of their inflictions in the life hereafter.

Marven (2011, p.27-28) says that Muller's texts portray the social and political concern of Eastern Bloc countries because she herself belongs to Eastern Bloc countries. He cited Butler's notion that literature is “a place where theory takes place” because it explains the ideas through theory and on the other hand, it also explains the theory through ideas. So as the research clarifies the theory of Marxism by explaining the socio-political scenario of Romania while on the other hand the very text '*The Passport*' contributes in understanding the theory of Marxism.

To recapitulate this article also exhibits the role of economy in building social and political scenario of Romania and the repercussions of this shakiness on the psyche of people. These rudiments draw a doleful picture of Romanian people's pangs and pains which they were

facing while living within the Marxian society because that Romanian society was a realm of ideas, beliefs, myths and a hub of all the social evils.

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