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‘FASCISM IN CATALONIA’ IN MERCE RODOREDA’S DEATH IN SPRING- A STUDY

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Abstract:

Merece Rodoreda, a renowned Catalan writer, wrote Death in Spring while in exile during the Spanish Civil War. The novel portrays the impact of fascism through symbols and images. Fascism is a political or social system that cancels democratic freedom, prohibits and persecutes political parties, closes the freedom of press, expression, and eliminates leftist ideology. The totalitarian principle of unifying the people by way of imposing a single language and culture was exerted upon Catalonia during the dictatorship of Franco. The narrator, his parents, step-mother, his daughter, cudgel man, deformed men, prisoners, pregnant women, ironsmith, his son, Senyor, and all in the village are under some sort of oppression. This novel demonstrates fascism through the depiction of customs, social divisions, and their occupations symbolically throughout. It is not a gainsaying that fascism manifests itself in imprisoning, punishing, and killing those who are fighting for democracy.

Keywords: *Merece Rodoreda, Death in Spring, Novel, Fascism*

INTRODUCTION

Merece Rodoreda is a renowned twentieth century Catalan writer. Among the novels of Rodoreda, *Death in Spring* which was published in English 2009 is regarded as a masterpiece. Rodoreda left her country and went into exile during the Spanish Civil War and returned to her country after lived in France and Barcellona in exile. During her exile, she wrote *Death in Spring* which was published only posthumously. Rodoreda seems to have written this novel in Catalan language while she was in exile. She has visualized how her mother land should have suffered in the Franco’s fascist and dictatorial regime in Catalonia. Franco’s fundamentalist rule imposed the policy one language, one culture and one nation in Catalonia and Spain. As an exile, Rodoreda seems to present the impact of fascism suggestively through symbols and images. An attempt is made in this paper to trace how fascism is depicted in this novel

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PLOT

The plot of *Death in Spring* is woven around the suffering and misery of the people almost all sections in a mysterious village perceived from a nameless boy. The plot dwells upon the brutal suppression inflicted upon the people by a system of strange beliefs in the backdrop of beautiful landscape. The narrator, his parents, step-mother cum wife, his daughter, cudgel man, deformed men, prisoners, pregnant women, ironsmith, his son, *Senyor* and all in the village are under some sort of oppression which suggest the impact of fascism allegorically in Catalonia.

FASCISM IN SPAIN AND CATALONIA– A NOTE

Fascism is described as : Italian political movement and later political party in 1919 in reaction to the disaffection following the post-war political settlement. It is principally associated with Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), who seized power in 1922, establishing the Fascist regime which lasted until Mussolini's downfall in summer 1943 following the Allied landings in Sicily. Though totalitarian in its aims and operations, at least until the alliance with Nazi Germany (1938) the regime did not consistently demand ideological conformity from the literary establishment. In its early years Fascism attracted the support of Filippo Marinetti, Giuseppe Ungaretti and Luigi Pirandello. Writers generally considered anti-Fascist include Vasco Pratolini (1913-91) Ignazio Silone, and Elio Vittorini. The nationalist element of Fascism led to the promotion of the cult of writers as diverse as Dante and d'Annunzio. [OCEL, 363]

Fascism refers to a political or social system which cancels democratic freedom, prohibits and persecutes the political parties, closes the freedom of press, expression and eliminates the leftist ideology. Catalonia was affected by the fascism of Franco during his dictatorship from 1939 to 1975. The democratic freedoms were suppressed along with the curbing of Catalan language in Catalonia. The language Castilian was imposed as the medium of instruction in the education system. The totalitarian principle of unifying the people by way of imposing single language and single culture was exerted upon the people of diverse languages and cultures. The uprising of the people against the fascism was controlled by shooting the people to death and exiling from Catalonia. Merce Rodoreda was also forced to leave Catalonia into exile. She was moved to outside Paris and later went to Geneva as an exile. Those who did not flee from Catalonia were put to a lot of prohibitions. It is observed that the act of repression against the individuals and attack on the Catalan culture remained throughout the regime of Franco.

REPRESENTATION OF FASCISM IN DEATH IN SPRING

Merce Rodoreda demonstrates fascism through the depiction of the customs, social divisions and their occupations symbolically throughout *Death in Spring*. It is not a gainsaying that fascism manifests itself in imprisoning, punishing and killing those who are fighting for the democracy in destroying the diverse cultures in the society to establish one culture. The people are constantly kept in the state of unrest and unsettling in order to prevent from organizing themselves to oppose the fascist rule.

The author has introduced a new custom of burial called tree burial or tree entombment. The universal custom of burial in the Christian community is cemetery in which the dead persons are buried or entombed. A cross is planted over the tomb. This custom is already prevalent in Maraldina. Yet another custom cemetery system is imposed on the people which tends to remove the custom existing already.

The new custom of burial is tree burial. According to this custom, a ring and plaque are made by the ironsmith as soon as a new child is born in this village. The person is brought to the forest of dead a few minutes before he or she dies completely. Then cement is filled in the mouth of the person.

After closing the mouth with cement, a hole is made in the trunk of a tree and the body is buried inside this hole. The hole is closed with a plaque and cross at the bottom of the tree. There are separate persons assigned each such tasks. The ironsmith prepares a ring and cross to be fixed on the trunk. One of the face-ravaged men makes a hole in the trunk first with a plank and then with an ax. The cement man fills cement in the mouth of the man a few minutes before his death and then the body is placed inside the trunk and closed. The ring and cross are placed upon the trunk as a sign. The re-burial of the narrator's father inside the trunk of a tree is illustrated as an example thus:

As the blacksmith was preparing to swing the axe a second, the old man who had walked beside him seized him by the arm, and he told the black smith that the tree should be opened with an axe – it had already been breached and – the axe blows could kill whoever was inside, if he was still alive. .. They started to shout. They shouted at my father who had little remaining breath and was clearly near his end. He was still alive, but only his own death kept him alive. They dragged him from the tree, laid him on the ground, and began beating him. The last blows made no sound. Don't kill him, shouted the cement man. The mortar trough, filled with rose-coloured cement, lay at his feet. Don't kill him before he has been filled. They pried his mouth partially open, and the cement man began to fill it. First with watery cement so it would slide far down inside him, then with which cement. When he well cemented, they stood him up and put him back inside the tree. The replaced the cross and left to prepare the Festa.[DS,19-20]

The tradition of 'tree burial' is not new. This tradition is prevalent among the people called Caviteño in Philippines. However, aim and method are different in this tradition. When a member of this group is about to die due to sickness or old age, he goes to the forest and selects a tree. Subsequently, the members of his family make a small hut for him at the base of the tree. The family members do not leave the person alone there. When the person dies, he or she is buried in the hollowed out the tree vertically. The idea behind this tradition is that they believe that the people show their gratitude to the tree which gives those fruit and wood.

The principle behind the tree entombment custom depicted in *Death in Spring* is to stop or hold the soul from leaving the body of the person through his or her mouth. It is the belief that the soul escapes from the body of the dead person through mouth in the normal death. If the soul is let out, it returns and haunts the village. Therefore, the mouth of the dying person is blocked and closed with cement and the soul is kept inside when the person dies. This myth is narrated in the novel as follows:

When we climbed Maraldina, the harring wind would push us backwards, and when we descended with sacks on our shoulders, the wind pushed us upwards. Whether going up or coming down, the wind beat against us as if it were pressing its huge hands against our chests. The old men explained that the low wind on Maradina blew through the brush when no one was on the mountain. It carried souls that wandered the mountain with the sole purpose of creating fierce winds whenever we went in search of powder, rendering our work more arduous.[DS,4-5]

The custom of tree-entombment needs to be related the idea of fascism. As stated earlier, the act of fascism is silence, imprison and kill the people in order to establish the totalitarian state. The act of filling the cement in the mouth of a person who is going to die suggests the denial of the democratic freedom of speech/expression. The act of burying the person in the hole of a tree suggests the imprisonment of the people in the fascist regime. The death of the person is not a normal death. It amounts to killing or murder as she or she is buried alive which suggest the act of the killing people in the fascist regime.

The act of fascism is performed in the imprisoning and killing the people in the name of cleansing the degenerated. The imprisonment and killing of the people is reflected in the depiction of a prisoner. There is a prisoner who is kept inside a cage. The reason for his imprisonment is that he is presumed to have stolen although what he has stolen is not clear and specified. The act of stealing is viewed as degeneration of culture and discipline. In order to do away with the degeneration, the fascists used to punish and kill them cruelly as a way of cleansing. It seems that there were many such prisoners earlier but there is only one in the village now. The brutality and inhuman act of harassing the prisoner is depicted in many ways. Firstly, he is put into the cage which is too small for his to stretch himself fully as shown below:

Only one prisoner remained in the village. Long ago, there had been another and he H'd lived, they said, twice long as most of the people did. The prisoners were thieves: the village only punished thieves, and they punished them by taking away their humanity. The blacksmith built the prisoner's cage. He made it small, just large enough for a person to sit in, but not lie down. The first prisoner had a wooden cage; every one recalled how he passed the time biting his nails until blood spurted them. The he would begin to sob. The wooden cage rotted before the prisoner had ceased to be a person, and they were forced to build a new one. The iron one, they said, would last a life time.[DS,62]

In the winter season, there used to be a lot of visitors to see the prisoner in the cage. They used to carry food and water for the prisoner. Besides, some women used to force him to neigh. The prisoner was so weak that his neigh would sound like yowl. Although they give him food, the way it was given amounted humiliating the prisoner as shown below:

On Sundays, many villagers went with their children to see the prisoner. They would toss his morsels of meat close to the bars, and he had to catch the scraps with his mouth. If he couldn't catch them, he had to pick them up from the ground with his teeth, like a horse eating grass. When no more meat could fit inside him, he would close his mouth and eyes, shutting the villages out, and on the following day he would be punished. If it was summer the blacksmith would smear honey on him, and soon the prisoner became a fury of bees. Before honey could be smeared over his body, he would be seated in a bucket, his ankles and wrists tied with heavy rope to the bars of the cage.[DS,63]

The punishment to the prisoner is strange and inhuman that it creates fear and panic in those who read such depictions. Whereas the prisoner is tortured with the sting of the honey bees as his body is smeared with honey, he is tyrannized differently in the winter. He is given the filthy and unfiltered water filled with worms to drink forcefully. The effect of such water on him is narrated as follows:

If it is winter, instead of smearing him with honey, they would force him to drink unfiltered water from Fond da la Jonquilla. Worms would emerge through his skin, and as soon as they did, they died, because they could not live without water. The prisoner was wasted after that, drained of strength. He would recover very slowly and open his eyes, without looking. I saw him once, hands and ankles tied, his head leaning motionless against his shoulder, a swollen vein in his neck.[DS,63]

The prisoner is released from the cage once in a while. Whenever he is out of the cage, he is regarded not as a person. This idea of de-personified is very strange in the normal situation but quite common in the fascist rule. In the fascist rule, those who are not part of the regime are dehumanized and de-personified. Those who are considered to be degenerated are subjected to such de-humanization and de-personification. The prisoner is identified as a thief and non-human like horse

and thus he is made to neigh rather than to speak. This prisoner is also pushed to death which is another act of repression of fascism. The prisoner expresses his desire to die to the narrator several times. He also adds that he does not want to die like his father with his mouth filled with cement. He wants either to die normally or the soulless death. The soulless death refers to those who die and are buried their complete death unlike the death of those who are entombed in the tree. The prisoner killed himself by letting himself slip into the water. He goes under the water and is swept away.

There are two kinds of political exile. One is self-exile which means the person leaves his or her home country on own lest such person's life is under threat. The second is excommunication of the person from the home country by the ruler when the person is suspected to create problem for the ruler. Again there are two types in the notion of self-exile. One refers to fleeing to a foreign country and the other refers to the isolation from the society within the country in all sorts of contact. It may also be called domestic exile. However, all these kinds and types of exile are meant to control and suppress the democratic and human rights in the dictatorial regime.

The concept of domestic exile was in practice in the Catalonia during the Franco's rule. The ideological rebels and revolutionaries against the Franco's regime were suppressed by way of isolating them from the people of the country. They were imprisoned, deprived and disqualified to hold public meetings. This notion is represented in the creation of the cudgel man.

The cudgel man has been living in a cave in the outskirts of the village for fifty years from his childhood. He is introduced in the novel like this:

In a cave behind Pedres Altes lived the man with the cudgel. His palms were scarlet from swinging his cudgel on so many nights. The cudgel was his defense; he earned his living from it. He was old no longer agreed to daily fights with boys from the village. The townspeople sent him boys one by one, and he received them, cudgel in hand. He was a tall man, taller than all of them. His hair was thinning, part-white, part-yellow. His toenails were like horse hooves: long and hard. Black. Because he walked through the manure pit near his cave to breathe in the stench, drawing strength from it. He had been trained in this manner since he was a child. [DS,90]

It is said that he won the cave from two popular cudgel men in the village through defeating them. He encounters combat with a boy or boys from the village regularly. There is a belief among the people that although the cudgel man defeats anybody who fights with him, those who are defeated by him are turned from being weak to strong. He spends his life in the cave. In the night he comes out and practices his cudgel swing. The people of village take food for him with which he survives. The cudgel man in the cave represents the self-domestic exile. His characterization makes one feel that he is a representative of the guerilla soldiers who used to attack the fascist regime. The cudgel man is also trapped to die. The narrator steals the cudgel and hides it from the reach of the cudgel man. The cudgel is the arms of the cudgel man. Then three strange boys attack and kill the cudgel man. These three unknown boys may be viewed as the fascist agents. The death of the man of the cave is presented in the novel thus:

Men were fighting in front of the blacksmith's house; my wife was seated in a corner, terrified, her hands covering her face. I walked through them, and just as I reached the group, someone grabbed me by the neck, a man I didn't know. He told me some boys from the village had killed the man of the cave and I was part of it, because my wife had borne the news. He took her by the shoulders. She said it was true, she'd heard shouts and had stopped, heard how the boys killed him, the old man groaning, the boys laughing. They killed him with his own cudgel. [110]

The representation of self-exile outside the home land is observed in the episodes of *Senyor*. The characterization of *Senyor* is very unique. *Senyor* is a Catalan word which means the master of household. Here *Senyor* is suggestively the master of the village. He is very old now. His home is situated on the top of hill. He stays inside this mansion and sees outside through the window. Although he is introduced in the very first chapter, nothing much is revealed until half of the novel is over. The narrator pays a visit to *Senyor* on the invitation of the latter and here he is described in details as follows:

At the far end, in a black armchair, sat *Senyor*. As soon as he saw me he squinted to bring me into focus, said he knew me, had known his mother, I was beginning to look like her. He burst into a coughing fit and the glass in the widow shook. When he stopped coughing, his chest rising and falling heavily, he asked about the blacksmith, and I explained about the fall. ...He told me he had been forced to live like that, had been given that kind of life.[*DS*,96]

From his narration to the boy, that he is forced to live in some of confinement becomes clear. This confinement is metaphor of exile. Since it is outside the village, it is suggestive of exile outside the land. *Senyor* has decided to die now. He wants to die without getting his mouth filled with cement which is tyrannical. He keeps repeating that he wants to die but not to be killed. The convention of filling the mouth of the person cement before he is actually is dead as good as killing the person. He wants to convey this message to the ironsmith through the boy. But when *Senyor* is about to face his death, his wish is not fulfilled. On the contrary he is killed according the custom of tree entombment. His death/killing is portrayed as follows:

They strapped *Senyor* to the stretcher by his feet and wrists. It seems an argument developed on the mountain – some men didn't want *Senyor* to be brought down to the village. They said he should die in his own house. But the blacksmith and the men with him convinced them, with words or with blows. As the stretcher reached one end of the Placa, the cement man arrived from the other side. *Senyor* looked at them with yellow, dull eyes, as if the film covering them had been ripped away. Everyone was in the Placa, the village crones in a corner by the shed where the paintbrushes were stored. The prisoner and the horses began to neigh; no one had ever heard such a chorus of neighing, all at the same time, that lasted so long.[*DS*,106]

The kind of mass and long respect to the death ceremony of *Senyor* shows that he is a leader of the village. However, what is stated about the way in which he is brought down in a stretcher is not true. There is another version described by a man next the narrator. According to him, when the ironsmith and his men went to fetch him, *Senyor* realized that they had gone to kill him. So he attempted to escape from them. But the goldsmith struck a strong blow on the back of *Senyor* making the latter fall down losing his consciousness. Then they put him on a stretcher and carried him down. However, *Senyor* regained his consciousness but his attempts to escape from met with failure. Interestingly, many people were trying to release *Senyor* from the stretcher several times. There was another group of people who attacked those who tried to untie *Senyor*. It led to tug of war between two groups of people. Yet *Senyor* failed to undergo the normal death as he was killed by the cement man thus:

Senyor began to cough furiously, bringing up cement; a drop of blood fell on the ground, he had dug his fingernails into his palms. His body retched again; when it calmed he was dead. ... All except one, who went to him, knelt down, removed the cement from round his mouth, and closed his now undiscerning eyes with his palms, so people would not see them. So people would not see the suffering eyes, the old

woman had knelt in front of him and with her rough palms had pressed his eyes half closed. while there was still time she said.[DS,106-07]

There are several customs and myths that are indicative of fascist suppression. One such custom is to swim in the river. It is ordeal for the swimmer through which whether or not the village would be washed away when the ivy is melted causing flood. The swimmer may survive in the ordeal or may come out with damages of his body. There is another custom which imposes that the pregnant women should cover their eyes in order to avoid seeing any man other than their husband. It is belief among the people that if they happen to see any other man than their husband, they fall in love with than man which will have impact on the child. Many persons are deformed and abnormal. Senyor is born with twisted feet. The narrator's step-mother's one hand is shorter than the other. The ironsmith's son is invalid. The narrator's mother is weird. The prisoner neighs like a horse. There were men without face, without nose, without foreheads, without ear. All these characteristics suggest that it is the deformity and abnormality of the democracy in Catalonia during the rule of Franco's fascism.

CONCLUSION

Rodorada's *Death in Spring* is a complex and knit with extensive and intensive symbols and images. The very title is an example in this regard as spring is the season of new life rather than death. There are several binaries like life and death; courage and fear; desire and despair; young and old; right and wrong; and soul and body. There is a dichotomy about the beliefs, customs and myths. It is quite obvious in the writing of an exile. The novel is also about the art of novelization and is a meta-fiction. It is quite obvious in the writing of an exile. Rodorada who was in the exile in France and Mexico at the time of Franco's regime in Catalonia perceives her country as being unsettling and in unrest. She needs a mask to expose the repression of Franco's fascism and has used those customs and myths as a mask or third person's eye to accomplish her aim.

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