

The Tolerated Bigotry: The Lurking Voice From The Forlorn Society of Herta Müller

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“When we don’t speak . . . we become unbearable . . .”

- Herta Müller, *The Land of Green Plums*.

Abstract: Women, in spite of being ignored for many centuries in various aspects have attained a great indomitable place in literature. They grew in numbers as they reflect the other sector of the prevailing society in much more candid way than their male counterparts. They have unearthed the field of literature in every possible way. Women’s literature gained much attention when many women writers voiced for their fellow females and echoed those voices against suppression and discrimination not only based on gender but also in the society in all means. It received great accolades in the various parts of the world. Whenever there is suppression and discrimination of women, there arises the voice through the literary works which is mightier than the sword. Herta Müller, a minority Romanian born German and a 2009 Nobel Laureate, explores through her writings the unspoken silences which become unbearable when they are purposely silenced in a totalitarian regime. Men of this minority group also bear the pains of the regime. But these entire traumas get intensified in their households. Müller in *The Passport*, a novella of 85 pages portrays how the officials under the regime force the commodification of women as an act of bribery. This paper explores how the women fall prey to the anger of the males and the other various exploitations in the bereft rural society.

As the title suggests, this novella is about a village miller trying to get the passport in order to leave his birthplace as it became very torturous place ruled by the totalitarian regime.

Irigaray notes, “Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man,” (Irigaray 1985: 177). She says that women are considered to be valuable commodity. All the people in the village, when a family or father or husband wants to migrate, they perform their paper works by means of satiating the sexual desire of the officials by sending their household women. With a heavy heart, Windisch, need to accept this destiny of his daughter. Katharina’s principle of exchange differs from Amalie’s. While the former is the beneficiary of her own labour, the latter’s an act of the disrupted society.

The female characters are the highly victimized category of people being the object of desire, victims of violence and accomplices of the patriarchal order that prevailed in the society. The women in *The Passport* try to escape various political situations and other patriarchal oppressions, by commodifying their bodies; those who never oblige for such commodification, are threatened, marginalized and are prone to lead a life in fear and anxiety. And so, they have

developed complex mechanisms for the negotiation of their desires. Karin Bauer remarks about Müller’s portrayal of gender in her essay on ‘Gender and the Sexual Politics of Exchange’:

Erotic desire and sexual longings are inextricably bound to relations of power in Müller’s writing, often foreclosing the possibility of differentiating between expressions of female desire and the instrumentalization of sexuality as a means to an end. . . . Sexuality, Müller maintains, is abused in dictatorships in all realms of everyday life (154)

Both Amalie and her mother Katharina, in *The Passport*, engage in such an exchange of sexual relations. Like the mother, Katharina, the daughter Amalie, is also forced to prostitute. Her life in Russia, as a prisoner, for five years is the real trial for her survival. The main mode of survival is to indulge herself in the act of prostitution for Katharina.

The extreme climatic conditions and the insatiable hunger never let Katharina to lead a common life. The scanty ration of bread and grass soup are helpless in substantiating her hunger. As an act of escape from the starvation and the freezing climate, and for the survival, she exchanged herself. She slept with a cook for the hot and sweet potatoes during a winter. The next winter, she lay down with a doctor and he gave her a note attesting her illness and so she might not go to work in the mine for the next three days. During the next winter, she went to another person, a grave digger, who gave her the warmth along with some left-over meals from the funeral meals offered to him by the villagers (*TP*, 74-76).

Windisch’s concern for his daughter is revealed in the opening chapter through his discussion with the night watchman: “My daughter,” says Windisch, weighing the sentence in his head, “my Amalie is no longer a virgin either.” (*TP*, 10) This knowledge about his daughter does not ease the pain in his heart, lessen his sense of shame and help him ignore the loss of face and honour, when Amalie goes to the priest and the militiaman, on summons. This ultimate bribe succeeds, when his sacks of flour and money failed to procure the passport.

An article review speaks about Muller’s views on the female and her sexuality:

Only women can sustain life, although they do this compromised and violated, suffering under conditions of personal degradation and impoverishment. The female and her sexuality is a recurrent and persistent theme throughout the novel. The female is both whore and mother, and, like the nature that subsists and endures despite its impoverishment, she is the carrier of seed and sun, bringing regeneration and light to each family's feelings of despair and discoloration. Muller pedals through the thickets with her own set of wheels, mobilizing and reasserting these themes of gender and the regime's contempt for women. (www.romania-insider.com)

The portrayals of many such women characters in the works of Herta Müller, withdraw themselves from the society as they have exchanged madness in the place of fear. "The mad woman's withdrawal from the society signals the withdrawal from the village economy" (Bauer.162) and they become a burden to their family and society.

Karin Bauer rightly points in the article 'Gender and the Sexual Politics of Exchange', in *Herta Müller*:

The women's descent into madness thus presents not only a way to escape the pressures of normality and the restrictive moral code of the village, but also a means of evading the subjugation to power. The escape is paid for, however, with mental derangement and death. (162)

Apart from these lunatic women characters, there are Amalie, and her mother, Katharina and the village postwoman who are mentally well. But, they become victims of their circumstances in the repressive society. Müller's texts, thus, raise its lurking voice from the despotic society being a replica of the 'waste land' of T. S. Eliot and all her characters stand a testimony to the tolerated bigotry of a forlorn minority community.

Works cited

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