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Wasted Homeland and Ecological *Foie Gras* in *The Land of Green Plums*

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In *The Land of Green Plums* we frisson a world of maniacal *foie gras* where power/ politics is an uncontrolled drive to arrogate without consideration of the other. Herta Muller scrummages jingoism to unravel the legacy of trauma that is left in the wake of war-mongering. She paints for us a bloodied community where men hack others to foreclose and preempt protest. The passage,

“Father keeps the graveyard deep in his throat... drinks schnapps made from the darkest plums... The hoe in the garden casts a shadow, which hacks nothing... the child can see her father loves her like crazy... he, who... the child wishes death on”

is the defining truism of this fractious state where governance is a stasis to maim individual rights through superimposition of an interdicted coda by a nepotic *politia*. Political fractures skewer citizens and reduce the nation’s flora and fauna to serve as endstops. Countries where humans and their habitat are so stripped off, the land becomes a palpable memoir to pain, unnaturalness and cultural dishabille that scars generations. When homes are destroyed and the land is ravaged, the homeland translates into a signpost – a cue to catastrophes *per se* –which leads us into a world of “shadow” where life, euphemistically speaking, is synonymous with the *stoa* to endure and engrain insouciance towards absolute, unletting persecution. Resistances and protests, variously camouflaged, percolate the novel’s topos. Even a child is not spared the realization that endurance is a vortex which pushes one into becoming a peg in the system, is a maelstrom where volition is an *act* – meaningless. *The Land of Green Plums* is a spool of warped hopes of survival in a nation browbeaten to ignominy by a solipsistic societis.

The abrasive nepotism in *The Land of Green Plums* so splinters the nation that its people are reduced to

non-beings – persons alive but without the right to live. The socially scarred and politically traumatized exist as *Edgar* – a quixotic character in *King Lear* – whose survival is proportionately contiguous to his ability to take on different guises and dissemble. This kind of configuring of identities scrapes the novel's Edgar who becomes a sounding board to violence where to “speak” is to “make fools of ourselves” like “pigeons” in the country's abraded urban spaces. In a totalitarian world, speak and double-speak guarantee nothing – life's interstice stifles and snuffs out the very trace of *Dasein*.

Written in 1993, *The Land of Green Plums* takes us through a ubiquitous land awash with the aftermath of brutal violence that desilts sanity, and induces a vicious cycle of repression. The genesis of this barbarity is traced to a refusal to recognize an *another* – an *erasure* that enforces submission without exception. The novel is a pastiche of tactile projectiles of the sensory and the cerebral. We discover right at the beginning that the *land* is a figurative graveyard which the narrator, vicariously and multifariously persecuted, cannot imagine without “a belt, a window, a nut, and a rope”. This is a homeland where plum trees are seen only in courtyards of houses which are an appalling picture of neglect and nostalgia, places where the abandoned old live. These trees are infected by “leaf-lice” and “leaf-fleas”. Degeneration of the flora triggers deterioration all around: communities, families and religious sensibilities become depraved and immoral. Subtly invoking Biblical mythology, Muller describes the holy mulberry trees that symbolize faith, resilience and rootedness as blighted by the induced cultural “drought” that “devours everything” and creates an unholy and listless calm. In real time, mulberry trees yield fruits early, can withstand high winds and have roots that grow deep into the soil. However odds are so stacked against these sturdy trees that it creates acute economic and social deprivation whose brunt is borne by the aged. The indiscriminate violation of the natural vegetation rips the familiar and leaves behind a quietus that comes from “loneliness” and estrangement from the land. It is a proven psychological fact that clement nature and mental health are directly proportionate. Receding nature has a telling effect on the narrator's grandmother who becomes afflicted by Alzheimer and keeps running amuck into the wilderness: a heart-wrenching portrayal of a woman who has flashes of her beautiful childhood ante-bellum land where bloodshed was beyond imagination.

Fascist governments in Eastern Europe largely backed sericulture; cultivating silkworms – larvae and butterfly eggs required sustained meticulousness while weaving silk from raw yarn required nimble fingers and back breaking labour that could lead to serious injury and disability. Women from

communities that were not favoured by the ruling party were mandated to conscript as farmhands while their children were exploited by weaving units. Capital punishment, political segregation and exile could follow non-compliance. In a flash-back scene where the narrator relives her harrowing childhood through surreal images of stepping on a caterpillar and those of her mother closely clipping her nails even though her fingers bleed – fingers which the mother surreptitiously swallows –vivifies the brutalization of mothers trying to shield their children from confrontation with a ruthless regime. This ineluctable constriction on a child's freedom guaranteed survival but triggered schizophrenia and paranoia among them. Fascism is a proxy war at the home turf which induces a vicious cycle of obsession with death and unletting persecution creating a wasteland where “the wind could never stand still, it could only lie down.” Pedagogy was a totalitarian tool to control and infiltrate from top to bottom. Children were indoctrinated and expected to tow the state program. A child with an independent mind or a rebellious streak was branded as a “devil's child” with “two thumbs on each hand, side by side” – suggesting confusion and delinquency when actually it was resistance to being degraded and dehumanized. Such children were severely punished and tortured till their spiritedness was broken. Forced into silk farming, the survival of these children depended on their ability to tend mulberry trees – “Every day the children... eat only mulberry leaves”.

The narrator's mother is part of the sandwiched generation that has to take care of its debilitated seniors as well as its vulnerable and threatened under-age generation. Her existence is *graphematic* for the totalitarian regime had nearly wiped out the older generation and massacred the contemporaneous wherever and whenever faced with ideological dissent. Farms were in a singular state of neglect with exclusive focus on silk-worm breeding and cash crops. With the disappearance of food crop, ban on imports and steep prices, insolvency and suicide were rampant. Survival was only possible if the men enlisted with the totalitarian forces or became informers. Women, like the narrator's mother married to an ex-Nazi, who had stayed back in the countryside with their aged, demented parents and children, were mandated to work at silk-farming and were many a times transported to concentration camps from where return was rare. Slipping through the skein of an observer, a victim, and a rebel, the narrator tells us that her mother weighed every innocuous and inadvertent act that her daughter made since the cultural clime was one of terror and espionage where anyone who did not second the junta was suspect and had no claim to neutrality. In a highly charged aporic scene, Muller paints for us a dystonic mother – fiercely

protective of her daughter, not wanting her to have anything to do with the harsh manual labour – trying to escape a catch-22 trap. In an acerbic parody of the surveillance state, the mother forces her daughter to a round-the-clock panoptic surveillance so that if need be, her daughter is able to survive in the real world and outwit the regime. In a metaphorically dense passage, we tango through an inexplicably harrowing potpourri of gruesomeness where we are left fumbling without interpretative cues – a gruesomeness where ecological imbalance is in unholy tandem with deteriorating human existence. In the backdrop, while an uncomprehending grandfather looks for his “pruning shears,” the child-narrator’s independence is undermined – her mother ties her to a chair with a belt and threatens her by “dropping... nail clippers” and letting blood drip on a symbolic “grass green” belt. The child is broken knowing that her mother loves her yet abuses her. In a community bind, the child intuitively understands the Gestapo: “She had been to the plum tree.” Her father is an ex-SS agent. The father’s inhumanity paints the landscape. Simple innocuous day to day routine acts like cutting ones nails are monitored to torture people. The narrator tells us how she would be tied to a chair and scared to death while getting her nails cut. Her shrieks, “Untie me” ring through the novel where to speak for the self was tantamount to getting massacred; the only alternative to passive conformity was getting shoved to death.

With the countryside devastated by war, the rural population ineluctably migrated to cities carrying sordid memories of their “province” with them, all the while seething with hate and vindictiveness. The farming communities lost their young men either to ruthless, emasculating wars or to a fascist mental lockjaw. The Ceausescu regime *shrove* ethnic communities and re-coined funerals and celebrations as ‘Days of Joys and Sorrows.’ (<http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/costica-bradatan-hertha-muller-cristina-double>) This deliberate grafting of the cultural *geist* was made impregnable by imposition of strict censorship and penalties on the slightest of defaulters. Inability to till fields and earn a decent livelihood splintered families. The countryside became a living graveyard where rape and prostitution became survival tropes for women who were increasingly physically, psychologically and sexually battered. Two central characters of the novel, Edgar and Lola dramatize this social sordidness. The two exist at society’s periphery; the former survives by subterfuge and obscurantism, the latter dies after an extended tryst with prostitution. ‘Lola’ metaphorizes a cultural clime which deprecates *Our Lady of Sorrows*. Lola, uprooted, violated and humiliated by the Junta survives the odds by trafficking

her self at isolated spots and bringing snatches of sanity to lives of men who have nothing in their lives except utter meaninglessness:

“mowing love that had never grown... on her dirty-white sheet.”

The writer paints for us a fatherland where fathers having abandoned their families for glories of war had created a legacy of dispossession and displacement. With the land and its settlements coming to a naught there was universal distrust. Every person was a scavenger, scouring and foraging for survival. Edgar somehow survives defilement perhaps because he is *Edgar* – the proverbial identity shifter who can, like Shakespeare’s Edgar, dissemble. He along with the narrator and their few friends retains the freedom to speak, howsoever threatened and fragile, because he can not only withstand and stand up against cultural defilement but also persevere with the most inconspicuous and the most significant cultural facet and artifact, for example, a hair strand, which has religious connotations and serves as a DNA sample, and is least suspect in the eyes of a Regime which aims at annihilation and power arrogation – a Regime where “... *fathers... had marched off... still it was the Motherland.*” (italics mine) We are taken across a praxis of survival where survival is not merely physical but cultural: erasure of the land and its history is fought by preserving the past in ingenious ways. Forensically, a hair strand pulled out by its roots verifies paternity while a wayward strand of hair attests to maternity. Herta Muller is one of the Swabian German minorities who were subject to insidious torture and conscription – she survived the everyday ignominy by dissimulation and subtle camouflaged protest. A hair strand was preserved and clandestinely smuggled out of the country to create war memoirs. The likes of Edgar and the narrator use evicted and evacuated areas to congregate, collect books, meet surreptitiously, survive, testify, and if possible escape with testifying evidence, howsoever intangible or disembodied.

The Land of Green Plums is a nightmare which goads us to take cognizance of totalitarian *foie gras* where the shining army brass and victorious trumps of war are glitz and show built on a superstructure of violation and vilification of ecological habitat – a subsumption that spares neither humans nor the animals and the environment. Fascism aggressively promoted industrialization and vulgar urbanization where

“...men... in factories... said to themselves, no more sheep, no more melons... they had gone chasing after the soot of the city... following the thick pipes... that crept... to the edge of every village.”

At her incisive best the novelist tells us that fascist ideology created a strong “proletariat of tin sheep and wooden melons” whose cultural displacement gradually abraded their ethical selves. We trace a trajectory where absence of proximity with the natural terrain and confinement within claustrophobic urban spaces leads to violence, alcoholism, and violation of women. Children get caught up in this violence which incites pervert thrill among them – “they smell the blood on their breath and they can’t wait to go to the slaughterhouse themselves”. Homes become war zones from which escape meant exile, while resistance becomes a series of repetitive encounter with escalating and unsurmountable walls of violence. The viscosity of denial defines a totalitarian state as generations mature in a psychological and mental lockjaw deliberated by and under the totalitarian eye. Trees are replaced by robotic foliage which scares the unsuspecting: trees “so bare that... shadows lay on the ground like antlers.” They camouflage war machines that suddenly appear like “strange beast in the big square in the middle of the city” while shadows – the “antlers” – shine “like the lines in someone’s hand.” Pure panic which breaches all possible trust, even among close friends, is generated for no one knows who or where the enemy is. The atmosphere of fear is a subtle and planned out stratagem where the natural habitat is so encroached and infiltrated by the war mongers that it becomes indistinguishable from the synthetic. Pigeons are used as surveillance stooges; harmless pigeons desperately pecking at the gravel terrify since they are suspect and barely distinguishable from metal contraptions. These birds however survive in claustrophobic city spaces where they are able to forage food despite indigent city dwellers who remain frantic to catch and cook them and are wary of their flight and freedom because a few refuse to poach and prey on innocent birds despite the scare that these birds if left alive may be exploited by the Regime. Dogs, man’s closest companions in the animal world, are ruthlessly trained to assist police squads that move among unsuspecting masses to spread paranoia and fear. These squads however spare men who are deranged and have no family so that their raving serves as warning against rebellion. Herta Muller shows how power games are self-defeating in the long run since love is a natural urge: the persecuted are merciful towards the suspect pigeons, the dogs love their masters, the mad man invokes pity in the most hardened

while the cruelest of interrogators remain on the lookout for some trust: in a touching passage, a character, Frau Margit tells the narrator-author that an SS agent had come to her and had shown her his ID while she was not wearing glasses “kissed” her “hand... was a gentleman... did smell of sweat” and was not acrimonious towards her when she “raised her hand... pointing to Jesus.” Nevertheless, the likelihood of ensuring survival and evading execution in totalitarian states is absolute isolation where thinkers and dreamers “shrivel up because love is all gone.” The totalitarian radar and the authority’s pincers suck out thinking patterns which forces intellectuals either to turn into informants or practice subterfuge which invariably invites conspiracy charges and death. Like the sheep, the dogs, the pigeons, and the mulberry trees and melons, the narrator finds herself becoming an escape contrivance unwittingly carrying a suitcase key in her underwear. The land of the green plums is a land where science is used to intractably erase every conceivable trace of wholesomeness from human life and the natural environs. The only way to resist this unnatural fattening is consistent resistance that subsists on faith and humanism.

