

The Illusion of Socialist Ideology and Russian Revolution: A Marxist- Deconstructive Reading of Doctor Zhivago

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Abstract

The present study investigates the representations of the socialist ideology and Russian revolution of 1917 in Doctor Zhivago by Boris Pasternak. The thrust of the study shows the alternative micro narratives, deconstructs socialist ideology and revolution as merely illusionist, foundationalist assumptions. These strands challenge and question the dominant status of socialist ideology and revolution as an absolute and an overarching point of reference. The existence of alternative micro narratives expose the myth of the socialist Russian revolution as an icon of brotherhood, freedom, democracy and the socio-economic justice. The study also shows absence of transformation in the mere replacement of one kind of totality by another of its kind. It only keeps the binaries of dominance and submission intact. The study is undertaken in the light of an eclectic theoretical framework of Marxism and Deconstruction.

Key Words

Resistance, Pluralism,
Totality, Alternative
Ideology

Introduction

The obvious reading of *Doctor Zhivago*, written by Boris Pasternak (1962), is about the glorification of socialist Russian revolution of 1917 and the socialist ideology behind it, giving it the semblance of “common sense”. The present study shows that the novel has multiple micro narrative strands. These alternative micro narrative strands challenge the social and cultural constructs about war, socialist ideology and the Russian socialist revolution by depicting them as the cause of human suffering and misery. The socialist ideology assumes the status of new totality. In doing so, these strands make *Doctor Zhivago*, a literature of resistance to the dominant ideology.

Literature Review

Doctor Zhivago has been critiqued by celebrated critics from around the world, but all this criticism cannot exhaust its potential for further readings. A very brief review of this criticism is presented here as a context and background.

Zaslave's critique (1967) of *Dr. Zhivago* takes into account the serious issues, like determinism, existentialism, life, form, aesthetics and art. The paper compares and contrasts *Doctor Zhivago* to *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 1951). He suggests compromise on the part of Pasternak, and an effort at reconciliation with the very forces he wishes to transcend, and calls the novel “penitential”. Zaslave does not find it as a critique of the Soviet society and culture, to which the present study does not agree. He finds it as a failure and an “officially sponsored act” and calls it “resurrected”. He further calls the novel as a “doctrinaire” novel, which, in his view remains unredeemed, for its lack of understanding of human suffering and misery. He also is critical of the novel for its mention of the basic human values, which he mistakes for the “explicit ideology”. The present study understands that the worthy critic could have condemned even Shakespeare for his “inward music” and celebration of life. He could rather have called Shakespeare a “Marxist” for touching on and anticipating the basic idea of Marxism in *King Lear*, otherwise the miracle in lyrical poetry, as examined by Jajja (2013). He could have said the same for Hemingway (2016) and Woolf (2013R.P.).

Jackson (1963) has investigated the novel from the perspective of the symbolic importance of the wild duck in it, given to Dr. Zhivago by an extremist. He regards the lifeless duck as a symbol of approaching disaster. The deaf-mute stands for the “soldiers’ revolution” and the dead duck as the symbol of Apocalypse and “crisis of culture”. It is a good study, but it has its limitations and its suggestions are very far-fetched. *Doctor Zhivago*, of course, is much more than the so-called “bitter fermentation”, Jackson finds in it. It would be unrealistic to suggest that the episode of the wild duck stands for the novel in its entirety.

Reynolds (1959) calls *Doctor Zhivago* as a genuine work of literature. Among other things, Reynolds dwells rightly upon the challenges attending upon the analysis of a translated work. On the whole, it is a general appreciation and celebration of this great work of art, with its focus upon the representation of human spirit. Above all, the essay is a powerful rejection of those critics and criticism which mean to belittle this great work of art and literature, for its political content. The critic is of the opinion that this is what which makes it a Russian work of art in its true spirit. The criticism again establishes the infinite potential of this great work for more readings till the end of time, as is contended by de Man about the interpretive inexhaustibility of literature (1986).

Steussy's critique (1959) of *Doctor Zhivago* asserts the lack of "common agreement" regarding the analysis and interpretation of such a complex novel as *Doctr Zhivago*. The present study cannot agree more with this point of view regarding the complexity of this novel and the diversity of comments it has generated, and will continue to generate. The study examines the major characters as symbols of different developments and strands in the novel. The culminating point of this study is that the deaths of Zhivago and Lara represent what was best associated with revolution or Russian culture. The exile of Tonia to Paris stands for what Russia stands for Europe.

Lilly (1981) has critiqued the novel from the angle of Moscow as a city and symbol. The paper establishes the importance and the contribution of urban centers, especially of Moscow towards the socialist revolution. The study calls Moscow the heroine of the novel, its Church of the Saviour as the symbol of the Christian spirit of the novel. This critique establishes the need and justification for the present study.

Lamont (1960) in his essay on the novel has focused upon the special significance of the poems in the appendix. It is an exhaustive analysis of the poems and their centrality to the novel itself is highlighted. This is good but very limited reading of this great work of art. All the above given readings are in the tradition of logocentrism, attributing everything to the intention of the author, without giving any credit to textuality. The given literature review has established a context and carved out the need and space for the present study.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The basic Marxist postulate about the centrality of material resources in shaping the superstructure of ideology and systems is to enlighten the current reading of the novel. The deconstructive method means to unmask the already existing alternative micro narratives which challenge and question the dominant socialist ideology and the social and ideological constructs about the glorification of war and Russian socialist revolution of 1917. The following research questions as suggested by Tyson (2006) are framed to keep the study focused and result oriented:

1. Does *Doctor Zhivago* show the plurality and multiplicity of narrative strands?
2. Do the alternative micro narrative strands in *Doctor Zhivago* question and challenge the illusionary nature of the dominant and obvious socialist ideology and construct of Russian socialist revolution?
3. Does *Doctor Zhivoago* show that with the framework of binary oppositions intact, real transformation is not possible ?
4. Does *Doctor Zhivago* deconstruct the dominant socialist ideology through its alternative strands?

Discussion and Analysis

Dismantling the Illusion of Socialist Ideology and Revolution

The novel starts with a depiction of the social and economic divide of Tsarist Russian society, with the land owning and powerful aristocracy presiding over the status quo and the starving peasants and workers suppressed by the dominant ruling class. These are two mutually exclusive worlds. The struggle and resistance of the peasants and the workers against aristocracy forces the Tsar to sign a treaty promising reforms. The half-hearted measures cannot stem the tide of unrest, reflective of the seriousness of the socio-economic divisions. Resistance, on the part of workers against their oppressors and exploiters in the form of strikes becomes a regular activity. The striking workers do this in the name of the right to life and living, equality and freedom.

The revolution comes in the wake of First World War. The Tsarist soldiers as a class don't consider this war to be their own war. Therefore they refuse to fight against the Germans. Tsarist regime is overthrown and socialist government is established. The people are extremely excited at the dawn of socialist revolution. They expect centuries of injustice, slavery, feudalism and exploitation to come to an end. Totalitarianism is expected to give way to participatory democratic set up. The revolution is supposed to bring bread, freedom, equality and justice. After the socialist revolution, everybody look forward to a reconstructed and transformed society on Marxist lines (Marx, 1967), with its emphasis on the redistribution of material resources, with a promise of minimum economic security, justice, freedom and equality.

The presence of alternative micro narratives show that the economic condition of people deteriorates. Typhus, hunger, acute shortage of fuel in Russian winter and general, abject, absolute poverty are the fruits of socialist revolution. Even the basic provisions like bread become a rare commodity. Perpetual shortage of food and medicine

breed a sense of desolation and despair. The masses experience the ceaseless horrors in the form of famine and disease. Civil war brings death and destruction to thousands. The whole villages are slaughtered and burnt down on suspicions of supporting the opposing side. One is reminded of Lessing (2000), who also believes that ideologies always lead to group formations and mutual destructions.

The party and its bosses are the new dominant power and now they preside over Tsarist status quo and have established themselves as the new ruling elite. The binary divide of society remains intact. The party and the revolutionaries fail to free themselves from the binary oppositional framework of dominance. They are shown as perpetuating the same social and economic divisions with worst consequences. The alternative micro narrative strands show revolution as merely changing the polarities, instead of ushering in a real social and economic transformation. The new power structure repeats the crimes of the Tsarist regime. The alternative micro narratives question the stable reference points of war, socialist ideology and Russian revolution. A new capitalist class has emerged in the form of suppliers, concessionaires and authorized agents for the economic and social exploitation of people. Nothing has changed for the general public.

Dr. Zhivago, is the central metaphor of the novel. He is not only sympathetic to the socialist ideology and its principles of justice and equality, but works untiringly to give medical aid to injured soldiers and civilians suffering from various diseases, which erupt in the wake of socialist revolution. In spite of his past privileged background, he makes all the necessary adjustments voluntarily and willingly. He can see through the layers of ideology. He is represented as getting disillusioned with abstract socialist ideology due to the gap between its idealized theoretical principles and its on the ground manifestation in the form of Russian socialist revolution of 1917. He is represented as the main sight of resistance. He resists the ideology of socialist revolution from inside and exposes it as full of contradictions and hollow.

Dr. Zhivago's escape from Moscow to Urals (Yuriatin) along with his family is represented as a form of rejection and resistance to socialist ideology and socialist revolution. The general savagery by the new dominant group has made the lives of people in Moscow impossible. The long queues at the railway station of barefoot people, with unbuttoned caftans, coughing and spitting, suffering from typhus, covered with lice and filth instead of warm clothes, tells the alternative truth about revolution and the promised redistribution of material resources. Party bosses lead the lives of pomp and show and have exclusive trains for their use. Stories of labour camps and night time arrests are common. The soldiers, representing, the new dominant group, indulge in extortion, intimidation and exploitation. Peasants are shown as falling prey to the civil war; their feudal oppressors are replaced by socialist super state.

Alternative narrative strands show that the socialist ideology becomes the new demon for injustice and oppression. It assumes the position of new totality, responsible for the crimes against people and the perpetuation of the social and economic divide in the society. These highlight the contradictions and gaps of socialist ideology and Russian socialist revolution. Even after nationalization, the socialist bodies allow certain individuals, like Samdeviatov, to carry on private business. The crimes in the form of arsons, killings of innocents by the socialists are highlighted. Dr. Zhivago himself is represented as a skeptic who questions and resists the practices and the attitudes of the Bolsheviks. Rats and wolves are used as symbols to express revulsion against socialist ideology and socialist Russian revolution for the monstrosities and abominations committed in their name. The functionaries of socialist regime are more frightening than wolves. The socialist regime spares no one, not even those who were or still are on their side. People welcome exile as a way out of fear and possible death.

Through the alternative representations of Komarovsky, true reality of socialist ideology and revolution is highlighted. He is an extortionist, a blackmailer, and an accomplished exploiter. Before socialist revolution, he had the life of privilege and he took advantage of everyone, including Lara, of every situation which even happened to be too far out of his way. Ironically, this monster is part of the new-post-revolution power structure. This is a serious indictment against the socialist regime. So much so, that Komarovsky is appointed the minister of justice in an autonomous region, established with the support and approval of the new socialist regime. He comes out of his rat hole, to complete the ruin and devastation of Larisa Feodorovna and Dr. Zhivago, and everything else that has survived the carnage unleashed by socialist ideology. The abduction of Lara, by Komarovsky, and her helplessness, shows that monsters and devils are in power in socialist Russia, and the people are worse off than they were under the Tsarist regime.

Representation of Human Misery and suffering Under Socialist Revolution

Pavel Pavlovich Antipov with the assumed name of Strelnikov, is the new face of post-revolution Russian power structure. Once an idealist, has evolved into an ideologue. The surface annihilation of the Tsarist regime and its replacement by his concept of revolution is the sole commitment of his life. He is represented as the architect of death and destruction in the new set up. All revolutionaries, hardened by ideology, as defined by Eagleton (1991),

including Strelnikov, are represented as psychopaths due to the indoctrination of ideology. They are the law now and they deal horrible punishments to their ideological opponents. For him his wife is not more important than a flea or a louse. He even does not see his father. He can be compared to Agamemnon, who sacrifices his own daughter with his own hands to materialize his ambition (Aeschylus, 1972). He still subscribes to the constructs of honour, glory, immortality and conquests. Strelnikov, a revolutionary commander, before he commits suicide, confesses that everyone associated with revolution is an imposter, a pretender. His last moment confessions and regrets are the representation of alternative truth about ideologies which breed nothing but misery and suffering for humanity. War and revolution have destroyed the personal lives of people. Lara blames ideology for the inhumanity and degeneration of Strelnikov.

The alternative micro narratives show that the anarchy unleashed upon the people in the wake of revolution brings misery and famine. The new dominant group live the lives of privilege and power. They behave like gods and the power has dehumanized them. Dr. Zhivago is conscripted as the army surgeon by the partisan commander Liberius. This shows the cruelty and oppression of the socialist regime. Dr. Zhivago resists the new power structure and tells the partisan commander Liberius to his face that they are responsible for the suffering and disorder which prevails. He also reminds the commander of the sea of blood they have spilled in the name of revolution and have failed to achieve anything. Dr. Zhivago very forcefully rejects the whole socialist ideology, its accompanying oppression and the theories and the means it has employed to achieve its ends. He feels like going mad and killing the commander with his own hands. The crimes committed by the partisans under the command of thoroughly indoctrinated Bolshevik, Liberius, which ironically means liberty, drives the survivors crazy. The Red commanders are represented as barbarians, given to massacres and killings of the dissidents. There is no question of any freedom, brotherhood and justice. Simushka, a sensitive and educated girl, well read in poetry and philosophy, grows lunatic under the pressure. She is locked up by the family, but she escapes out of the window to preach to the people about the Second Coming and the end of the world. Lunacy is also represented as a form of resistance by Woolf (2013) and Barker (1991).

The socialist Russian revolution and its commanders are represented as the harbingers of only surface change. It is shown that the underlying invisible social, economic and cultural structures remain intact, in spite of the upheaval. Dr. Zhivago is shown as rejecting socialist ideology, for its exclusive approach and the socialist revolution for its rejection of life, love and humanity.

Representation of War and the Apparatus of Power

War and warfare are not glorified in *Doctor Zhivago*. The socialist soldiers are shown as suffering from psychic illness and disorders, reflecting the negative impact of the war upon the mental health of the soldiers. Some soldiers go mad in the face of war and ideology. This is a rejection of war and ideology. Palykh, a socialist soldier, who himself has committed monstrosities against the opponents of revolution, suffers from hallucinations, insomnia and goes mad. Madness is a form of resistance to war and ideology. Barker (1991) and Woolf (2013) have also dismantled the conventional constructs about war in the same way. Palykh is shown confessing his war crimes to the doctor, responsible for his psychic illness. In his madness he himself kills his wife and three children and flees from himself like a dog with rabies. The crimes and atrocities committed by the counter revolutionaries under Vitsyn and Strese, challenge and question the glorification of war and socialist ideology. Strese is a monster, his war crimes cannot be talked about, and these are rivals in savagery and outrage to the crimes of the Red Partisans. He does not spare even the children and women. These alternative micro narratives show the very ugly face of war and ideology, and the horrible things they are responsible for, instead of glorifying them. These narratives show that in the name of grand designs and larger than life objectives, horrible crimes are committed.

Rebellions and revolts against the socialist commanders are also the representation of resistance to the socialist ideology and revolution. The subsequent death sentences and executions of the White ringleaders reflect the seriousness of resistance to the socialist ideology. The deserters are put before the firing squad. Some of the condemned are not yet grown up men. The continuation of binary thinking without real transformation is represented. The socialist revolution is represented as a human disaster. Thousands of people, women and children included, are shown uprooted from their hearths and homes. Hunger and starvation are the biggest killers. The idle trains serve as mortuaries and mass graves for the victims of typhus and cold. War and ideology has converted human beings into beasts. The laws of human civilization are suspended, man exists at the prehistoric level of cave dwelling, and cases of isolated cannibalism also surface.

Wars unleashed by socialist ideology and resistance to it, reduce the lives of people to the level of absolute absurdity, when everything in life becomes meaningless and loses its purpose and significance. Vasia, a young boy, who shares the plight of Zhivago in his wanderings, is another victim of the workings of ideology. His mother drowns herself, mistaking him as killed by the Red Army. The oppression and tyranny drive educated people crazy.

The majority of them apparently are made to conform to the so called socialist ideology and these reformed intellectuals become champions of communist ideals. The duplicity and falsehood, compromises their mental and nervous systems. One is reminded of Sansa Stark in *Game of Thrones* by Martin (1996). The methods employed by socialist regime to “re-educate” and re-orient the intelligentsia at the so called “Palaces of Thought and Academies of Ideas”(Pasternak,1962, p.401) are what Eagleton (1991) calls as the “apparatus of power”, and are also depicted by Barker in *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991). Their job is to make people “fit” and “normal” for the effective social control. Finally, Dr. Zhivago is destroyed by the new dominant power, in spite of his surface cause of heart failure for his resistance to dominant ideology and power. Similarly, Lara is crushed and ravaged, both spiritually and physically by the operations and the consequences of the dominant ideology and its perverted manifestations in the form of socialist regime in Russia, with its own commonsense and reference points.

The discussion has clearly shown that the presence of alternative micro narratives have highlighted the horrors of war and ideology in the form of pain and suffering of human beings. These are representations of desertions by soldiers, commanding officers running for their lives, the instances of indiscipline and disillusionment with ideas and ideals like patriotism and duty. The novel exhibits the human and material cost of war and the suffering and misery it brings for mankind in its wake, like bloodshed, savagery and homelessness. Armies on the retreat, wounded and shell shocked soldiers, with mutilations and mangled faces are represented. These alternative representations of war and ideology are in line with other postmodernist representations of the same by Lawrence (1992), Woolf(2013), Owen (1965) , Barker (1991) and Lessing(2000)

Findings

The exhaustive analysis of *Doctor Zhivago* in the light of selected theoretical framework proved the major hypothesis of the study that the alternative micro narratives challenge and question the socialist ideology and revolution. The obvious image about socialist ideology and revolution stand deconstructed .The analysis also provided answers to the research questions. The analysis found that *Doctor Zhivago* has highlighted the contradictions and dissonance between the conventional glorification of war and the reality of war in the form of human and material cost of it as depicted in *Doctor Zhivago*. The study has answered in the affirmative regarding its main hypothesis that the novel undermines conventional image of war and warfare. The discussion also showed that *Doctor Zhivago* reveals that socialist ideology and the socialist Russian revolution were only illusions, therefore they fail to deliver anything other than hunger, disease, poverty, oppression and unprecedented number of killings of innocent human beings. The analysis made it clear that no real change is possible so long as the binary structures of the society remain intact and uncontested. One group of exploiters and oppressors is replaced by another group of hooligans. The feudal and Tsarist tyranny is replaced by the party dictatorship. The novel was found showing the new socialist order only replacing the old and decadent Tsarist order. It was shown that the real transformation is not possible unless the underlying invisible binary ideological structures are subjected to critical thinking.

Conclusion

The final conclusion of the study is that the presence of alternative micro narratives in *Doctor Zhivago* shatter the illusion about socialist ideology and the socialist Russian revolution and has unconcealed them as totalities, which oppress and subjugate the very people they are supposed to liberate. *Doctor Zhivago* has represented the contradictions of the socialist ideology and the socialist revolution and has presented the atrocities and the crimes committed in their name. Socialist ideology and Russian revolution are depicted as false constructs not more than illusionist, fascist and foundationalist assumptions.

The study also concludes that the novel shows that ideologies/binary thinking not only perpetuate the social, cultural and economic divisions, these are also responsible for the misery and suffering of human beings and the destruction of societies, cultures and civilizations. The critical examination of oppositional binary framework in *Doctor Zhivago* depicts that no genuine social transformation is possible in a framework of dominance and submission. The study concludes that *Doctor Zhivago* shows the Russian revolution as a falsity in the name of change. It is a fascist regime, under which new power structures replace the older ones. Socialism and socialist are merely misnomers in this context. In this Boris Pasternak stands alongside other resistance writers like Woolf (2013), Owen (1965), and Shaw (1931), who shattered the social cultural constructs and exposed them as lies.

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