

Elements of Communist Ideology in the Novel *The Queen of Streets* by Gabriela Melinescu

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Rezumat: *Acțiunea se petrece într-un București comunist în care Președintele își construiește mitul conducătorului prin ruperea prezentului proletar de trecutul corupt al boierimii și înființarea societății civice. Această societate presupune acte grotești ale Președintelui (scris cu majusculă) care se consideră întruparea divinității. Dorința lui de a rămâne în memoria statului său chiar și după ce va muri este privită cu umor negru: „Deși era în viață, Președintele voia să-și asigure nemurirea, să intre în memoria secolelor. Se gândea că, după moartea lui, succesorii vor face totul pentru a fi uitat. Știa foarte bine acest lucru. Și el îl denigrase și făcuse să dispară din amintirea oamenilor urmele Președintelui de dinaintea lui. De aceea, se hotărâse să-și creeze mitul încă de pe când trăia, să glorifice clasa muncitoare cât timp era stăpânul absolut. Dacă se întâmpla într-o zi să trebuiască să moară, lucru care i se părea totuși inevitabil, cel care va veni după el i-ar distruge opera. Dar, datorită a tot ce făcuse și continua să facă ca să-și făurească gloria, putea fi sigur că va rămâne întotdeauna ceva din domnia lui. De aceea avusese o idee genială. Să-și împăieze poporul. Cine putea distruge memoria unui popor devotat Președintelui său?” Consecința acestei dorințe se concretizează într-un “Muzeu al Lucrătorilor Neobosiți”, loc în care poporul credincios conducerii va fi împăiat și expus pentru ca generațiile următoare să se închine trecutului luminos. Deși muzeul de carton nu este sortit eternității fiind distrus în urma unui incendiu, Președintele nu renunță la planurile sale de a rămâne în memoria colectivă și demolează un cartier select al Bucureștiului pentru a construi “marele centru de dezvoltare civică”, Casa Poporului, clădire impozantă care arată orgoliul conducerii.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *mitul conducătorului, societatea civică, ideologia comunistă*

Gabriela Melinescu (b. 16th of August 1942, Bucharest) is a Romanian, poetesses, writer, essayist and also a Romanian and Swedish translator. She is originally from Romania, but she has been living in Sweden since 1975.

In 1965 she starts her career with the book “Winter Celebration”, followed by “Abstract Beings” – 1967, “Inside the Law” – 1968, “Divine disease” – 1970, “The Oath of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience” – 1972, “The Murmur of the Light” – 1972, “Against the beloved” – 1975. She leaves the country, together with the Swedish editor, *René Coeckelberghs*, who will become her husband in several years.

Supported by Rene, she continues to write at the same intensity, not only poetry but also fiction, her literary activity being highlighted/ doubled by painting and engraving. Shortly, Gabriela Melinescu starts to write fiction in Swedish and French, but she doesn't abandon her mother tongue, becoming a reputed translator in and from Swedish.

“The Father of Lies” – 1977, “Children of Patience” - 1979, “Ascension of the Wolves” -1981, “The Queen of Streets”- 1988, “Home among Strangers” – 2003 are among the novels written in Romanian, Swedish and French.

During all this artistic and literary activity, Gabriela Melinescu is keeping a diary, an important documentary material where stories about the life in exile are revealed, her emotions when receiving news from her native country, meeting with famous figures of the Romanian literature - her friends and acquaintances. In her diary she also recounts about the process of writing her own books.

“The Queen of Streets” is a story about life during communism, about the horrors this regime has brought to Bucharest and away, about fear and hallucination, where a group of people from a suburban neighbourhood is trying to survive beyond time. These are not good or bad characters, these are people who experience bizarre situations and try to escape in the land of dreams. There are no heroes, nobody succeeds to save oneself or find happiness due to the fact that there is this environment which forces them to accept life as such.

It is a strange book, representative for Gabriela Melinescu, having a story born from a nightmare or hallucination, with grotesque characters, amusing and frightening in the same time, a book with a difficult clue. Even the title reveals a story line both ironical –

the beggar, and dostoevskian, as in “The Insulted and Humiliated” – a book about the outcasts, the ones who live the bitter life of the streets without any hope.

The atmosphere is eschatological, reminding of Marquez and Borges, fed by The Presidents grotesque ideas, drugs and the alternating music, both aggressive and nostalgic, hallucinating scenes and serial suicides.

The story takes place in a communist Bucharest where the President has already started building his image as an absolute ruler by separating the proletarian present from the bourgeoisie corrupt past of the bourgeoisie and by creating the civil society. This society implies grotesque acts on the part of the President (the first letter is capitalized on purpose) who considers himself personified divinity. His desire to be remembered by the state even after death is described by means of black humour:

“Though still alive, the President wanted to ensure his immortality, to be remembered over the centuries. He was well aware of this fact. He himself had denigrated the former President and obliterated him from people’s memories. This is why he decided to create his myth while still alive, to glorify the working class while he was still the absolute ruler. If he were to die one day, a fact that seemed to him rather inevitable, the one who would succeed him would destroy his creation. However, due to everything he had done and continued to do in order to strengthen his glory, he could be certain that something would always be remembered from his reign. That is how he had a brilliant idea. To stuff his nation. Who could then destroy the memory of a nation that was completely devoted to its President?”

The direct consequence of this desire was the creation of a “Museum of the Tireless Workers”, a place where the nation - faithful to its leader - would be stuffed and exhibited so that the future generations could bow to the bright past. Even though the cardboard museum was not designed to last an eternity as it was destroyed during a fire, the President did not give up on his plans of remaining in the collective memory and thus he demolished a select neighbourhood of Bucharest in order to build “*the great centre for civil development*”, the People’s House, an imposing building that shows the ego of leadership.

Teiul Mare Street is inhabited, however, by people who do not fit in the picture of a communist Bucharest, who do not look forward to the golden future, who live their lives according to former traditions. Paying close attention to the textual economy, the author presents characters that are extremely different and originate from mediums that the totalitarian regime would have wanted to obliterate. The street is inhabited by very different people that only fate could have brought together. Here are a few examples: Zeno, the shoemaker, is married to Fosca, a strange woman that walks her sow, Tapia, in full view while petting it and telling it that it smells of jasmin. Zora - Fosca’s sister - is a fortune teller who reads the future of the President’s Wife (capitalization intended)

Zeno’s worst enemy is Aaron, the jew who dreams of going to Jerusalem and dedicate his life to the Torah. Aaron has a very good friend, Simon Hahanul, married to Dora, who always wears a silver bell to keep away the demons. Looking for redemption, the two friends keep looking for the Prophet, who they think they saw one day in the eyes of a peasant in the market. They however scare him off and he refuses to come back. General Algon is a pensioner who writes his memoirs stressing upon the heroism of Marc-Aureliu, his comrade on the battle field. The General who looks back with nostalgia to the times when the bourgeoisie was not considered a social disease, has a strange family comprising his wife - who, when killing herself manages to flood the house with blood (reminiscent of the mystery of a nightmare) - and the triplets Veronica, Vera and Verona, who act as a Cerberus, standing by the window of the house and guarding the street.

Eliakim is a magical-realistic character. He is an old priest who dies on his way to the Theology College, but whose soul enters the body of a young drunkard, who also dies

in the house of his rich parents after a night of excess. The old priest continues to live his life in the body of the young man, he gets admitted to the Theology College, becomes a priest by assuming the name of the deceased and even marries the wife of the old man, who is inexplicably attracted to him.

Antoaneta and Sandora seem to be avatars of the same being, by their very extremes. If we take into consideration the statement that the author made in her diary, which says that her soul is inhabited by several beings that take the lead in turn, which would explain the changes in attitude from optimist to pessimist, we could consider the two young friends as two facets of the same being. The two young girls are governed by love and this is the very reason why they die. After having spent her life hating men, Antoaneta falls in love for the first time, but she dies because of her very own wish of staying with her lover; Sandora's only wish is for her husband to return to her. Yet when he dies in mysterious circumstances, her reason to live dies with him.

The Queen of the Street is Sandora, a young girl who never knew her parents, but who knows that her mother was Augustina Nebuba, a beggar that everyone living on Teiul Mare street knew. Augustina had died while giving birth to Sandora. After spending her childhood in an orphanage, Sandora ends up in the street once again, where she fights to survive. Paulin, the son of Aaron Peretz, represents the young man that would do anything to have fun with his friends, from stealing his father's gold to mocking the meek. On New Year's eve, while spending the evening with his friends in a pub, he notices Sandora, the beggar he used to see on the street and he asks her to join them. In the deafening noise of the pub, the girl tries to forget about her problems and so she immediately accepts the invitation. Being drunk, Paulin promises in front of his friends that he will marry her, a promise he will later keep, being too ashamed to admit that he was drunk.

Sandora represents the naive woman, who never takes a decision by herself and leaves everything to fate when she leaves with Paulin. Shortly afterwards they get married, having nothing in common apart from the fact that neither of them knew their mother, since both women had died at childbirth. Although they form a family, they never manage to communicate. Paulin keeps trying to change Sandora, while she keeps doing everything her husband asks of her. Rumours start to appear claiming that the marriage has not been consummated, as Paulin did not want to get close to Sandora and regretted having kept his promise. Aaron disapproves of his sons actions and regards Sandora with resentment and scorn. Shortly afterwards, Paulin runs away with the gold that Aaron, his father, had gathered for his trip to Jerusalem.

The actual plot is eclipsed however by the fantasy scenes that remind us of Mircea Eliade's short stories. They are mainly based on oneirism, such as the scene where a mysterious woman dressed in black and wearing a frightening grin slaps Antoaneta over the face with a glove, while asking her to leave her husband alone, a man that Antoaneta does not even know. Another such scene is the one where an architect, Toma (the doubter?) meets an incredibly beautiful girl, whom he takes home with him. As he looks at her through the window however, he sees her as an old woman, dressed in black, with sharp teeth, a chilling grin and a scythe in her hands. Half of the novel is comprised of such scenes based on the bizarre, the grotesque, fantasy and oneirism.

Antoaneta and Sandora are friends and the one thing they have in common is Paulin, one being his mistress and the other his wife. While Sandora is an introvert, keeping her thoughts to herself, Antoaneta is extrovert, telling everyone what she wants. She represents the intellectual woman, interested in literature and literary criticism; she's a student and contributes with articles to a cultural magazine.

Antoaneta despises men and in this respect, her character fits Simone de Beauvoir's stereotype: „*she detests the idea that the object of her desire (sex) should be subdued under*

the power of a lover or a husband". Although she seems shallow because of her various affairs with married men, Antoaneta is part of the city's high social circles and makes acid remarks when she notices discrepancies. Such is the case of Irina Banu, the president of the literary circle, who is admonished by Antoaneta for the fact that she makes compromises when she facilitates the reading of proletarian poems, disregarding their literary quality.

The transition from reality to supernatural is performed in scenes that remind us of Hildegard and Gavrilescu. The protagonists live in parallel worlds that are only governed by love. The living meet the dead, and the living are powerless when it comes to the will of the dead lovers. Such is the case of Fosca, who drowns her sorrows in alcohol after her husband's body is stuffed for the Museum of Tireless Workers. After she spends all her money on alcohol, she takes her beloved sow to the slaughterhouse and continues to drink and weep, confessing that she has sold her soul.

While she walks drunk through the park, Fosca meets her dead husband who invites her to a promenade - the resemblance to Eliade's "La Tiganci" is striking. She accepts, thinking that she was lied to when she was told that Zeno had died, but the being she sees has actually come from the world of shadows, with the sole purpose of facilitating her access to death. Though at first, her experience can be considered a mere hallucination, a newspaper article proves the opposite. Fosca's charred body is found in the park.

Death is in the air of Bucharest. Even though it is everywhere, it seems that the neighbours on the Teiul Mare Street are just slightly affected by this. The bigger picture shows extreme phenomena: First, the continuous snowing that blocks all the city streets and thus the transport, consequently stopping the food supply.

People are dying of cold and hunger. Samora is searching in the trash bins, but she finds nothing but animal corpses. It seems like the sky has opened and the snow is death's messenger. The snowing finally ends, but another disaster follows. The flood unleashes when mountains of snow are melting. The city swamps in mud, streams are carrying human and animal corpses as a silent warning of the hell on earth, the aquatic apocalypse brought by the totalitarian government.

The novel can be interpreted in different ways, surreal novel subordinated to the dream and a mirror-novel of the communism seen through the eyes of the pre-communist generation. A very representative passage in this respect is the Tailor Scarabel's reply, from the Central Committee, when he proposes to the nostalgic general's daughter: "we have to wave goodbye to the nobility now as we still have the power! With my scissors I am as noble as you are, whether you like it or not."

The novel can also be interpreted as having as central line the life of an innocent beggar who tries to survive.

"The Queen of Streets" is a complex novel. Choosing only one interpretation would diminish the intensity of the message. Therefore I believe that this novel represents a chronicle of the suburbs affected by the communist regime, after which nothing can be the same anymore.

This heterogeneous universe of the suburbs, both from a social and cultural point of view, consists of poor people, people who dream of nothing but escape in the land of dreams, but the dream turns to nightmare, the nightmare drawn by the oppressive government.

Death's silhouette insinuated by hallucinations is the only relief that takes the burden of the physical and moral pain. The end that doesn't hurt, only frightens. The author herself confesses in her diary: "... I always think that death can take me to her warm arms, the warmest arms I have ever been."

The novel seems to be built out of contrasts, a game played by lights and shadows. The characters are mysterious and strange, gathered on purpose to these suburbs, on the principle of alterity. The thickest shadow is Sandora, who does not speak, nor cry or

complains. She doesn't even meditate, she just observes what is happening around and acts instinctively as an animal always hurt.

Through the eyes of this woman, not through her voice, we are informed of the President's plans, she listens to the surreal stories told by the other characters, and when these stories belong to her, she stays away from interpretations and mean remarks.

The novel is an objective narration, unusual for feminine fiction. There isn't a beautiful or intelligent woman telling her story, there is no love story with a happy ending. There is not even a clue to lead to this feeling disrespectfully treated by Antoaneta, the only young and beautiful woman in the novel. The drama belongs not only to a single person; it belongs to the entire community.

The author is not hiding behind any of the characters; she has a detached impartial tone where from we can depict only the personal history of the people on Teiul Doamnei Street directly affected by Ceaușescu. These characters find their escape in dreams, often with the help of alcohol and this dream always becomes a threatening nightmare, maybe because the government threatened those who didn't comply with it.

"The sometimes achieved dream, of "keep on running" and "the eternal return", the vanishings and the returns, metamorphosis and immovability- all these antagonistic elements are reunited (as in the Marquez's eternal Macondo) in a unifying principle, both their sum and summa. "The wheel of fortune" solves all contradictions and fades all dualities. The tragedies and the joys of the neighbours on Teiul Mare Street are striking when seen closely, but they fade away when enlarging the picture, becoming in the end meaningless, having sense only if they enter into a story or give life to a memory [...]. Even the structure of the novel suggests this continuous rotation: all the chapters/episodes are little stories of their own, but perfectly integrated in the big Story that is written by the very flow of the little ones – as a kaleidoscope. A "figure" appears at a certain point in the front row, together with its story and the end of a chapter is equivalent with an adjournment/suspension of the little story. The off cut is especially designed so it allows a continuous connection/association inside the fiction, between characters, events and their significance.

If we follow the biographical stream, we can find the roots of this novel in the author's determination to note her dreams. Traumatized by her experience of living during communism, she relives in her dreams the moments of fear, panic and frustration that she used to experience while coming back home in Bucharest and finding her apartment devastated. Even ten years after she left Romania, Gabriela Melinescu still dreams that she turns back and she needs to live the nightmare all over again.

The novel is story of darkness where all the characters experience panic and resignation of a living in a continuous terror. The characters find their relief in the land of dreams, in death, religion, superstitions and magic.

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