

The Correlation between Literature, History and Culture in the Select Novels of Olga Nawoja Tokarczuk: A Cultural Materialist Reading

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Abstract:

Olga Tokarczuk's novels combine the elements of an ordinary culture, epic of Polish history and very factual mythology of daily life. Literature, history and culture are the inseparable elements according to the cultural materialists. The paper is an attempt to identify the "residual", "emergent" and "oppositional" cultural elements in the select novels of Olga Tokarczuk. It attempts to diagnose the hidden political agenda and power structures in the novels of Olga Tokarczuk and simultaneously look for potential subversive aspects to relate the texts to the present i.e. the inseparability of the linguistic and the social in the structure of discourse. The study involves using the past to 'read' the present, revealing the politics of a society by what it chooses to emphasize or suppress the past.

Keywords: *Olga Tokarczuk, history, culture, politics, cultural materialism, Raymond Williams*

I. Introduction

The article is an attempt to identify the "residual", "emergent" and "oppositional" cultural elements in the select novels of Olga Tokarczuk. It attempts to diagnose the hidden political agenda and power structures in the novels of Olga Tokarczuk and simultaneously look for potential subversive aspects to relate the texts to the present i.e. the inseparability of the linguistic and the social in the structure of discourse. The study involves using the past to 'read' the present, revealing the politics of a society by what it chooses to emphasize or suppress the past. The study identifies illustrations of unlearning of the inherent dominative mode. Raymond Williams' major contribution as a critic lies in recognising the once privileged field of "culture", as a potential category in Marxist aesthetics, by declaring and theorising that "Culture is ordinary" on solid and firm grounds. Williams views 'culture' as an area where diverse categories - a way of life, art and literature, politics, ideology and history - meet, undergo changes and assume new shapes. It shows and records the transformations of the

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social phenomena and its historical determinants. The study seeks to draw attention to the processes being employed by contemporary powerstructures, such as the church, the state or the academy, to disseminate ideology. To do this, the research explores a text's historical context and its political implications, and then through close textual analysis note the dominant hegemonic position.

Olga Tokarczuk, born in Sulechów in 1962, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature for the year 2018, and winner of the Man Booker International Prize in 2018, is one of the most critically acclaimed and most translated Polish writers. She is a phenomenon of popularity respected for her good taste, knowledge, literary talent, philosophical depth and the knack for storytelling. Tokarczuk, says about herself, 'To me, writing novels is telling fairy tales to oneself, moved to maturity'.

The study discusses the influence of the author's life in the novels. It throws light on the marginalized beings in the novels of Olga Tokarczuk. It also examines the subcategories of marginalisation like gender, race, sexuality and class. It is a research on the cultural materialistic values, much portrayed through the characters and the events connected with them in the novels chosen for the study. As the Cultural Materialists argue, the novels provide the social realities of the particular period in which they were written. The novels of Olga Tokarczuk play a role as a mirror to reflect contemporary society.

The following five novels of Olga Tokarczuk are taken for the cultural materialist study.

1. *Primeval and Other Tales*
2. *House of Day, House of Night*
3. *Flights*
4. *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*
5. *The Books of Jacob*

Her third novel, *Primeval and Other Times* (1996), is still widely considered her greatest and most resonant success and top achievement in recent Polish mythographic prose. A mythical village called Prawiek said to be located in the very centre of Poland is an archetypal microcosm in which all the joys and sorrows known to mankind converge. Jerzy Sosnowski, a literary critic, wrote about the book, 'Using fragments of real history, Tokarczuk builds a myth, that is a perfectly ordered history in which all events, be they tragic or evil, are justified'. The novel is an amalgamation of a family story, an epic of Polish history and the very factual mythology of daily life. It's written in the tradition of magical realism which earned satisfying comparisons to the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This book opens with the line "Primeval is a place that lies in the centre of the universe". The small village of Primeval (Prawiek in Polish) in the center of Poland is a sign of 20th-century Poland and a metaphor for the whole world: a magical and unfathomable cycle, where truth is intimately entangled with the realm of myth, Christianity with paganism, civilization with natural elements, and quiet daily life with the iron tread of history. Before our eyes, this chronicle of the Boski and Niebieski families becomes a chronicle of the human race.

Tokarczuk's next novel, *House of Day, House of Night*, written in 1998 and shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2004, is different both in genre and tone, and it is misleading to call it a 'novel'. A hybrid of diverse and more or less advanced plots, quasiessay observations, private notes and the like, it is Tokarczuk's most personal and 'local' book, drawing inspiration from the area where she lives (a

village in Sudety on the Polish and Czech border), such as in the stunning story of the medieval Saint Kummernis, a woman whom God saved from an unwanted marriage by giving her a male face. This is not merely a book of stories, but a freakish mixture of immensely diverse tales with a semi-mystic underside, close explanation of the changing between day and night, the lives of saints, descriptions of dreams and even recipes for mushroom dishes. The novel's hero dwells in a clandestine home on the outskirts of Nowa Ruda, 'a city of hairdressers, second-hand clotheshops, men whose eyelids have become entrenched with coal dust', at the foot of the Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border. By watching the lives of her neighbours (the elderly wigmaster Marta, who sees spirits and many other things) and communicating with them, she not only begins to better realize the world, but also unlock fresh dimensions of truth, unreachable from a surface glance. An important support in this are dreams, and not just her own – the protagonist is a collector of other people's dreams, the most interesting of which (like, for example, how a character called Krystyna managed to discover a stranger dreaming about her) she shares with us the reader. For the novel *House of Day, House of Night*, Tokarczuk used the technique of non-linear narrative for the first time in her writing career.

In 2018, Jennifer Croft's translation of *Flights* won the Man Booker International Prize, the most important literary award for international fiction in Britain. Tokarczuk's *Flights* is not a travel book, but a book about the phenomenon of travel. After a mythographic novel with emotional ties to the described place, Tokarczuk has surprised readers with a study of the psychology of travelling. At the same time, the book's title is the name of an old Orthodox sect which believed that staying put made one vulnerable to the attacks of Evil, while continuous moving helped to redeem the soul. A similar motivation, though more secular and stemming from the longing for freedom, drives the heroes of each of the novel's themes. There is a woman who looks after a disabled child and who does not return home because of a revelation she experienced in a church; an Australian researcher who revisits Poland years later, coming to see her terminally ill friend; a mother who takes her child and leaves her husband while on a family holiday in Croatia. There is also a story of Chopin's heart being transported to Poland, and one of a seventeenth-century anatomist, professor Ruysch, his daughter and his collection of specimens which gets ultimately sold to tsarist Russia. It has an odd composition – like a patchwork quilt or a thorough map of an unknown bright sky. It is a multifaceted, multi-plot novel with a collective hero: the non-linear arrangement of the book unfurls through numerous novellas and short stories, notes 'in the margins', overheard conversations, dreams, letters, curious facts. However, such diversity doesn't create the novel disjointed or clumsy at all: all of the parts are skillfully en suite together, and while approaching the ending you begin to see, almost physically feel, that all of these stories are strongly entangled with each other, forming an imaginary pattern, the gracefulness of which could be by the greed of snowflake crystals.

The synchronization of this novel, which critics compared to the ripples of a marble tossed into water, is provided by the reality that all the heroes of *Flights* are in steady movement, on a path, on a road, sitting in buses and airplanes, steamboats and trains. Journey for them is not just a part of life, but life itself, like, for instance, for the members of the sect of "flee-ers", loathers of established survival and thinking that only constant movement in space will aid a person slip away from the hold of the Antichrist and the chains of Babylon. Tokarczuk's characters could make the well-known words of philosopher Gregory Skovorda into a motto: "The world tried to catch me but could not." However, it's wrong to think that this flight from suffocating certainty for them is an end in itself. An attentive reader will surely see a certain phrase is repeated several times throughout this rather

extensive novel: "The purpose of the pilgrimage is another pilgrim". Not one accidental meeting on the road is actually accidental, as it helps us through the incomprehensibility of the other to see the infinity of one's own "I".

Drive Your Plow through the Bones of the Dead was released in 2009. Olga Tokarczuk is well-known for her dynamic support of animal rights movements and other ecological initiatives. She does not hide her left-wing, feminist, and anticlerical views, which, it must be said, tend to irritate several Polish politicians. Therefore it's not shocking that the author's social positions are also reflected in her books. This novel provides an amazing display of the qualities that have made her so notable a presence in existing literature. The novel is almost impossible to categorise, can be called an ecological detective novel or a philosophical thriller. It is, in effect, a murder mystery: in the bleak Polish midwinter, men in a remote village are being murdered, and it is left to Janina Duszejko, a type of eastern European Miss Marple, to spot the killer. Tokarczuk calls her novel 'a fairy tale with elements of a political pamphlet'. Those who hastened to accuse her heroine of 'eco-terrorism' clearly took the book too literally, overlooking the most important thing – the metaphor. In the novel, she toys with the genre of suspense while addressing the issue of a 'human' way of treating animals. It is a deeply pessimistic and melancholic story about environment protection, set in the scenery of Silesian mountains, with an intertwined motif of suspense.

In 2014, a long-awaited and written over six years *The Books of Jacob* was published by Wydawnictwo Literackie. This massive narrative is a unique melting pot of faiths, nationalities and cultures. In the centre of this vast historical-literary canvas, skillfully woven from the luxurious fabric of Central European history, is the turbulent life of a charismatic Jewish heretic, mystic and adventurer, Jacob Frank, who has declared himself the Messiah. The novel's main character is perpetually crossing these boundaries, and with such ardour, as if 'the whole world is not enough' for him. And what underscores this passion, this indefatigability during the quest, is the entirely sumptuous style of the book – its language is lush, baroque, matching the er depicted, but at the same time very much alive and therefore, surprisingly modern.

It is not merely a novel about the past. It can be read as a reflective and sometimes mystical text concerning history, its twists and turns that determine the fortunes of entire nations. Almost a thousand pages, several dozen threads and characters, *The Books of Jacob* is an epically impressive novel, multifaceted and open to a wide range of interpretations. The story is set in 1752, the region of Podolia, part of Lesser Poland Province of the Polish Crown and revolves around a Jew named Jacob Leibowitz Frank. The mysterious newcomer from remote Smyrna begins to preach ideas that quickly introduce discord into the Jewish community. Considered a heretic by some and a saviour by others, he is soon surrounded by a circle of devoted disciples, and the unrest he induced may change the course of history. The novel's protagonists, starting with Jacob Frank himself, become embroiled in some ambivalent situations and conflicts. The prophet who propagates liberation from oppression, the emancipation of women and free love, also becomes a source of sexual slavery and a cruel despot. The provincial priest, composing his anachronistic, absurd encyclopaedia, in which the entry for "Horse" goes: "The horse is as everyone sees it", proves to be the tenderest writer of love letters, and his bashful, modest affection is one of the most moving features of the novel. By twisting this quote, one could say that in *The Books of Jacob* no one is as everyone sees them. Nor is history either.

Olga Tokarczuk draws extensively on the tradition of the historical novel, broadening the scope of this genre. She depicts the epoch with meticulous care, including architecture, costumes, and scents. We visit estate manors, Catholic presbyteries and Jewish homes, engrossed in prayer and mysterious scriptures. Before the readers' very eyes, the writer weaves an image of Poland in its former days, when Christianity, Judaism, as well as Islam, co-existed side by side.

Tokarczuk openly says that she is a feminist and supports activities for environmental protection, animal rights and equality. She collaborated with the Green Party and was a member of the editorial staff of the leftist magazine "KrytykaPolityczna". However, Tokarczuk's left-wing attitude has for many years brought her a large group of critics who accused her of dealing with trivial and dull matters or striking the image of a writer. After awarding her with Nobel Prize a lot of racist comments pointing to her supposedly Ukrainian roots, vegetarianism and the fight for women's rights - which were aimed to ridicule her - appeared in the right-wing media.

By deconstructing linear time, exploring alternate ways of knowing, and literalizing the abstract, Tokarczuk deftly questions dominant discourses of Polish culture, such as that of the "Recovered Territories" or the power of religious faith. She highlights aspects of experience that do not appear in archives, are otherwise undocumented or have been silenced by their marginality. She contemplates the nature of historical evidence in our understanding of the world. Tokarczuk proposes a new way of processing Polish history that does not follow grand narratives, which are often tied up in concepts of national martyrdom, victimhood, and Catholicism. Rather, she refocuses the attention of cultural memory onto regional aspects and stories that acknowledge individual experiences of place and time, recreating the past through remnants of lost narratives. To achieve this, Tokarczuk simultaneously reinforces and abandons the dominant structure of historicity characteristic of postwar Polish prose and poetry, and presents literary worlds whose order relates to the main events of the twentieth century without the burdens of national identity. Tokarczuk submits historical rupture to a wholly secondary and exterior relationship to her narratives, thus opening the door for exploring alternate ways of knowing and seeing the world, preferring a synchronic, toponymic approach over diachronism and chronology. She abandons History as an objective narrative order posits alternatives to gaining knowledge about the world, particularly a world traumatized by the past.

Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* is an exercise in literary history but explores literature by relating books and authors to the broader historical and social development of ideas, and culture as a 'whole way of life', 'a mode of interpreting all our common experiences' (18). Culture is therefore not the culture of an elite, but a culture that is embedded in everyday experience and activity. The culture that Williams is interested in is the culture that emerges as a complex criticism of industrial capitalism. Like his contemporary Richard Hoggart, Williams may however still be seen to be working in tension with the dominant Leavisite approach to literature and culture, and thus the tension between an understanding of everyday culture as it is, and any attempt to evaluate parts of that culture more highly (or as more civilised) than others. The Long Revolution takes further the analysis of culture as a way of life. The revolution is that brought about by 'the progress and interaction of democracy and industry, and by the extension of communications' (12), and the analysis concerns how this affects all aspects of everyday life. A key (if not precisely defined) term introduced by Williams is that of 'structures of feeling': the lived experience of a particular moment in society and history. In the 1960s and early

1970s, Williams demonstrated a greater interest in the mass media. While in his early books he tends to present the mass media as a threat to the revolution of democracy and the rise of a 'common culture',

Marxism and Literature (1977) marked a major development in Williams's work, as it represented his first thorough-going engagement with Marxism, and thus with several important theoretical resources for cultural studies, including Althusser's conception of ideology and Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Williams is unhappy with the uniformity suggested by orthodox Marxist accounts of historical epochs. He argues rather that any moment in history must be analysed in terms of the presence and interplay of dominant, residual and emergent cultures. This is to suggest, not merely that there are historically backwards and forward-looking elements within culture, but that culture is, therefore, a site of political contest, as groups express their incorporation within the dominant order and their resistance to it. While Williams never offers a single formal presentation of his theoretical position (and indeed, that position develops and changes over Williams's career), his work may be characterised as cultural materialism. His approach to culture is to recognise that it is entwined with (but not simply determined by) the economic and political structures and experiences of life. At the heart of this is an exploration of the history, uses and political complexity of language, manifest elegantly in *Keywords*.

Accounts of history, culture and literature should aim to be specific and concrete rather than general and abstract lest it risks surrendering 'reality to a formula'. We should do away with the Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, or 'true' materiality and 'false' ideology because the culture is always inextricably material and bound up in material and social processes. Culture is also irreducibly complex, although there may be ruling powers; it has, finally, no fundamental coherence. It is a site of constant struggle and change. Within this struggle, some cultural groups are dominant, while others are residual or emergent. However, they all form part of the complex set of social processes known as culture. When analyzing cultural objects it is important to be aware always of the material and social processes that made them. Within this cultural milieu, individuals still maintain a degree of consciousness and individual agency. We should avoid the structural Marxist trap of making people mere 'superstructural effects'. Literature offers us access to some of the sites of ideological incoherence and struggle in the culture in which it was produced.

Olga Tokarczuk's novels combine the elements of an ordinary culture, epic of Polish history and very factual mythology of daily life. Literature, history and culture are the inseparable elements according to the cultural materialists. It is fairly a method of considering contemporary political issues through the mirror of earlier texts. Her works help to recollect and understand the historical and cultural background of Poland as well as the significance of Raymond Williams' theory of cultural materialism.

The word "culture" not only indicates the richness of the traditions but also points towards the economic background, politics, literature, art, languages, food, social activities, education, religion, beliefs, and history. The materialist reading of culture centres on the politicised history of the particular period. "Cultural materialism" is one of the important theories to focus on history beyond the texts. "culture" in the sense of cultural materialism does not limit itself to "high culture" but includes all forms of culture.

Literature is the only medium to reflect the power structure of the particular period, values and customs of the dominant culture, and the issues of the marginalised. As the Marxist critics say that history always originates from the stories borrowed from the victors and ruling parties. But the literary texts are the true feelings of the author as what he/she faced on the "certain period and it reflects the reality of the history".

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