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THE HYPERBOLE OF CONSUMPTION AND EXPLOITATION IN TENDER IS THE FLESH: A GLIMPSE THROUGH MARXIST LENS

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Abstract: The paper aims to look at the Argentinian author Agustina Bazterrica's work *Tender is the Flesh* in an attempt to extract and emphasize the Marxist hyperbole in the novel. The work is a dystopian piece of fiction, depicting one of the most horrendous of phenomena known to humankind – cannibalism. Not only is cannibalism widely accepted in this world, it is normalized, legalized, and backed by the government. The outbreak of a virus has rendered all animal meat poisonous to people which is why the mass-producing institutions of industrial farming and meat industry have decided to fill this gap with new kind of 'special meat.' Using Marxist analysis, the paper highlights how the consumption of human meat and all the processes involved in rendering them as dehumanized in order to be made fit for consumption can be read as a hyperbole for the contemporary world situation wherein the workers' humanity and rights are being encroached upon and they are being consumed by capitalism and the profit-based economy.

Keywords: Marxist Analysis, Science Fiction, Reification, Dystopia, Literature and Ideology.

1. Introduction

Questions of the Study

Though not stated specifically, the goals and substance of the research allow one to deduce the following questions:

1. Marxists would help one understand consumerism and exploitation in *Tender's Flesh* by means of their perspective.
2. In what ways does the book use exaggeration to symbolize capitalism's human consumption and exploitation?
3. In what way may institutions and the government help to normalize the system of extreme exploitation and consumerism in the novel?

4. How does the book show how under the capitalist system human interactions merge with market logic and commodification?

Aims of the Study

In *Tender Is the Flesh*, we see a world where a virus has infected every kind of flesh. The absence of animal meat makes cannibalism acceptable. As a human meat provider, Marcos is tormented by his losses and confused by this new civilization. In the first chapter of the book, the act of killing humans called "heads" is detailed. The "Transition" described a catastrophic occurrence in which a virus that affected animals was discovered to be lethal to people, leading to widespread killing and burning of animals. As a consequence, everyone on the planet was either compelled to go vegan or devour each other. Following this, the globe experienced complete pandemonium.

1. The study provides a Marxist critical reading of a contemporary dystopian novel that highlights themes of consumption, reification, and alienation.
2. It reflects the real-world conditions through a hyperbolic mirror, revealing the depth of human exploitation under capitalist systems.
3. It contributes to the expansion of Marxist theory applications in modern literature, particularly works addressing ethical and social dilemmas such as cannibalism and commodification.
4. It reopens critical questions regarding power, class, and identity in the context of human commodification in dystopian fiction.

Significant of the Study

1. One should examine how the book uses exaggeration to show extreme consumerism and exploitation.
2. To clarify how in a dystopian capitalist society human being are objectified and turned into commodities.
3. To underline how political and financial power interact dialectically to create this imaginary universe.
4. To provide a critical Marxists viewpoint tying the story of the book to modern society reality.

Section one

Bazterrica's " Tender is the Flesh " As Cannibalistic Dystopia

Agustina Bazterrica, born in Buenos Aires in 1974, has a degree in arts from the University of Buenos Aires and works as a cultural manager and jury member in various literary contests. She is the author of the short story collection *Nineteen Claws and a Black Bird*, and the novels *Matar al niña* and *Tender Is the Flesh*, the latter of which was awarded the Clarín Novel Prize. *Tender Is the Flesh* established Bazterrica as a bestselling author worldwide, with translations into thirty languages and half a million copies sold in English alone. *Tender Is the Flesh* is currently being adapted for television. Her latest novel, *The Unworthy*, was

published in Spanish in 2023 and received the same enthusiastic reception as *Tender Is the Flesh*, affirming Bazterrica's status as a prominent author in contemporary literature.

Her most famous works are:

- Matar a la niña (Textos Intrusos, 2013)
- Antes del encuentro feroz (Alción Editora, 2016)
- Las cajas de Unamuno (Audiocuentos de la Nueva Narrativa Argentina, 2017)
- Tender is the Flesh (Alfaguara, 2017) Cadáver exquisito
- The Unworthy (Penguin Random House, 2023) Las indignas

Short Stories

- In Sangre Fría (PelosDePunta, 2016)
- In El nuevo cuento argentino: Una antología (EUFyL, 2017)
- In Revista Próxima 37 (Ediciones Ayarmanot, 2018)
- In Cuerpo (Anfibia Papel, 2019)
- Nineteen Claws and a Black Bird (Alfaguara, 2020) Diecinueve garras y un pájaro oscuro

Tender is the Flesh As Cannibalistic Dystopia

Written in a detached objective-seeming third person perspective, the novel *Tender is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica is a harrowing tale of a dystopian setting where meat industry has had a jarring metamorphosis. Instead of transforming to become less cruel and less destructive, animal meat has now been replaced by human meat. Originally written in the year 2017 in Spanish, the work was translated into English in the year of the coronavirus breakout – 2020. As ironic as it may seem, the cannibalistic world's predicament is brought upon by a similar virus which infects animal meat. The protagonist Marcos Tejo recalls the initial breakout:

"The mass hysteria, the suicides, the fear. After GGB, animals could no longer be eaten because they'd been infected by a virus that was fatal to humans. That was the official line. The words carry the weight necessary to mold us, to suppress all questioning, he thinks." (8)

The horrors described by Marcos are jarringly similar to the ones experienced by the world during the initial COVID breakout. However, as the real world settled into the new normal with masks, sanitizers, and new precautionary measures as part of one's quotidian life, similarly, the people in Bazterrica's world come to terms with the horrifying choice in front of them. Humans could either choose to go vegan or they could choose to consume their own species and as ironic as it seems, most people in the world choose the latter. This addiction to consuming living beings is a telling remark on the nature of the human condition. Instead of going vegan and vowing to not eat meat again, the people come to terms with self-consumption. In this world, the meat industry has to manoeuvre its way very cautiously to ensure there's no backlash against their new product – human meat. The euphemism "special

meat” is used to lazily disguise the vile nature of consumption being undertaken all over the world. Marcos sees through this barely concealed charade when he muses about this euphemism as a marketing technique for the larger rebranding process undertaken by the government and the big meat industry to ensure an easier transition from animal meat to the new “special meat” (10). Calling special meat by its real name – human meat – comes with the threat of death attached to it. It is very Kafkaesque indeed that the government decides the fitting punishment for someone acknowledging the humanity of the meat being processed for consumption is to send them to the “Municipal Slaughterhouse and process” them (7). Processing, here of course, refers to killing and preparing to be sold as meat.

However, Marcos, our protagonist is a man riddled with contradictions because he is privy to the workings that unfold backstage due to his job as the supervisor for a processing plant, the Krieg Processing Plant. The antithetical natures of his profession and his personal beliefs are always at war inside him, causing his internal monologue to be rife with a ceaseless existential crisis. He acknowledges the despicability of the processing business but is unable to get out of this line of work as he has to support his senile father, Don Armando, who suffers from dementia. As the narrative unfolds, we see how Marcos navigates his life at work and personal life – which is next to nothing as he and his wife are separated due to their being unable to successfully have a baby. A series of miscarriages has caused his wife, Cecilia, great distress and she now lives with her mother. His complicated married life coupled with his father’s dementia, his sister Marisa’s refusal to participate in their father’s treatment and finally his work life has rendered Marcos a hollow man from inside out.

Overview of Marxist Theory

Although Marxism was not initially conceived as a method of literary analysis, its principles have been applied to literature from early on. Historically, literature has oscillated between being perceived as a conduit for productive critical dialogue and as a threat if it deviated from ruling ideology, literature became intertwined with the philosophical tenets established by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. As the position of literature evolved over time it became evident that Marxism offered a fresh lens for reading and comprehending literature (Dobie 85).

The relevance to that struggle of a Marxist reading of *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch* is not immediately apparent. But if it is a mistake to confine Marxist criticism to academic archives, it is because it has its significant, if not central, role to play in the transformation of human societies. Marxist criticism in part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies – the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times. And certain of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature. To understand both the past and the present more deeply; and such understanding contributes to our liberation (Eagleton Preface).

Traditional orthodox Marxism dictates that the primary catalyst of history is the dialectic relationship between society and its economic systems. The means of production and those who own these means determine the fate of social conditions. Marxist theory is a highly relevant and useful means for analysing contemporary literature and culture, as it provides a framework for understanding how economic and social factors determine power relations and social structures. Moreover, a Marxist analysis can help to illuminate the insidious ways in which capitalism and its associated systems of exploitation and commodification pervade

contemporary society and literature. Unlike other theoretical systems which provide us with tools to widen our horizons and thought, Marxism provides us tools to implement change and demand progress through its views and beliefs.

The aim is here to not undertake an aesthetic criticism judging the work on the basis of its form and unity but to pay attention to its content. While it does not do justice to completely overlook the formal parameters of the text, it must be kept in mind that the space allowed here is limited and therefore, I must specify my scope to the analysis of the political content of *Tender is the Flesh*. Nonetheless, one must remember that form and content are both equally paramount in carrying the message put forward by both the text and its creator. It should be acknowledged that Marxist criticism is well aware of this and “sees form and content as dialectically related, and yet wants to assert in the end the primacy of content in determining form” (Eagleton 22).

Section Two

Tender is the Flesh Through a Marxist Lens

It may appear superficial and reductive to subject a literary text such as *Tender is the Flesh* through a Marxist analysis, however, the work is a perfect specimen of the tumultuous relationship between society and its economic system. As palpable as it may seem due to the text’s overt thematic concerns revolving around exploitation, commodification, and literal dehumanization; however, it doesn’t mean that a Marxist treatment of this novel doesn’t warrant merit and is not as valuable.

Tender is the Flesh offers a neat critique of capitalist society and how the commodification of human bodies has led to the construction of a uniquely ruthless version of capitalism. Bazterrica presents the meat industry as the primary capitalist enterprise in this world which uses human meat as a commodity to replace the lacuna left behind by inedible animal meat which is now unsafe to consume. The use of human flesh is presented as a plausible life extension to the meat industry. The exploitation of animals, has been replaced by the human stock who are now treated like animals and subjected to brutal conditions in order to maximize profits. The cruelty to humans is brought to the surface but at the same time, we are reminded, time and again, of the cruelty animals have to face in the real world.

The first ones to be sacrificed when the GGB outbreak happened were the proletariat, represented by the “immigrants, the marginalized, the poor.” As the legalization of special meat hadn’t been undertaken yet, those who were disenfranchised were the first ones to be “slaughtered.” Bazterrica points out how immigrants in various countries started disappearing and it was realized that they were chosen to replace the animal meat and were now the primary source of protein for those who could afford and those who chose to abdicate their ethical affiliations (9). In highlighting the plight of the proletariat, Bazterrica commits her art to their cause, which is the primary expectation of Marxist criticism from an author (Eagleton 35).

"Not only is human flesh processed into meat to be consumed, but so is their skin is used to create a new type of leather. In Chapter 2 of the book, we follow our protagonist to the Hifu Tannery, where “the smell of the chemicals that halt the process of skin decomposition” assaults his olfactory senses and his psyche" (12).

2.1 Definition of Hyperbole.

The literal objectification of the humans is quite apparent in their processing into products to be consumed by the wealthy elite. The processes involved in dehumanizing the people before they are turned into products to be consumed is vividly described in the book. The literal dehumanization and consumption of the human meat can be perceived as an on-the-nose hyperbole which corresponds to how the capitalistic system treats people. The reification of meat as the primary relationship is constantly reinforced in the novel. “The reduction of value to exchange value and the domination of the human world by objects” – and in this case, the object reigning over the world is – “special meat” (Selden 96). Selden opines that reification becomes apparent when “the world of object begins to displace the individual” (97). Previously, the object only had importance in relation to people and was not the supreme authority; but in the materialistic world motivated only by the hoarding of objects and things, the individual has been replaced by the object, the thing. In Bazterrica’s world, the individual has quite literally been transformed into an object, valued only due its meat-offering property.

The act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man-produced things which have become independent (and which are imagined as originally independent) of man and govern his life. Also transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world. Reification is a ‘special’ case of alienation, its most radical and widespread form of characteristic of modern capitalist society (Bottomore 463).

There has been a long-drawn-out debate amongst Marxist scholars and theorists whether reification is a form of alienation or of commodity fetishism or even of both (Bottomore 465). However, the scope of this study does not allow the space to cater to these concerns. What we concern ourselves with is how the world in *Tender is the Flesh* has achieved heights of the hyperbolic reification through the medium of special human meat. All the relations in this world are determined by meat and its availability. Having been raised exclusively non-vegetarian, the characters in the book could not imagine world without meat or the option of adapting veganism. Marcos emphasises how important it is to maintain cordial relationships with people in power who operate breeding centres, no matter how depraved they and their actions might be. One such man is Guerrero Iraola, who owns the eponymous Guerrero Iraola Breeding Center which supplies more than half the country. The man is a hunter who enjoys the hunting of celebrities who have accumulated crippling debt and have volunteered themselves to be hunted and eaten if captured; if not, their debt is waived off (113). Everything in this dystopian world is determined by the prized meat. Marcos abhors these people but cannot afford to say it to their faces, much less cut off ties with them because he feels “one never knows if they’ll have to do business with someone like him again” (116).

Marcos seems suspicious of the government regime and his remarks suggest that the outbreak of the GGB virus may just be a ruse used by the government to keep population in check and to protect the interests of the meat industry overlords by not letting their profits dwindle after animals became unpalatable (9). By focusing on the collusive role of the state in maintaining and reproducing these systemic structures of power and exploitation, we could try to understand the novel’s dystopian society and the forces that drive it. Todd suggests that the work offers “a striking metaphorical commentary on how neoliberal capitalism’s powerful few exploit/consume the less powerful many” (1). The state plays a central role in the production and regulation of human meat, after having legalised it. Bazterrica depicts how the government serves as a tool and as a mediator for maintaining and providing legitimacy to this vicious capitalist system of exploitation. The government does not intervene to stop this practice of self-consumption; however, it intervenes to ensure the efficient production

and consumption. Marcos says that the government cunningly decided to stop calling this new meat as human meat and instead pedaled euphemisms like “special meat,” “special tenderloin,” “special cutlets,” and “special kidneys” (10).

Not only are people dehumanized as replacement for meat, they are also dehumanized as the workers in the meat industry. The workers portrayed in *Tender is the Flesh* possess no agency and have no collective representation to secure their rights as workers. They are forced to work under terrible conditions for low wages and are expected to treat special human meat as with the same disregard as they would for animals.

The conclusion of the text makes us question everything Marcos has told us and sheds suspicion upon him, deeming him an unreliable narrator. However, one must understand the contradiction inherent in the human mind. Moreover, despite enduring a brief horrendous condition of a life and the inhumane end she had to meet, Jasmine had to be disposed of, in keeping with Marcos’s class affiliation and his proclivities. Marcos was and always has been a bourgeoisie agent, living in a mansion, having clandestine affairs with butchers, procuring prime meat for his plant, abusing Jasmine and then finally putting her down like an animal (after she has served her purpose to him). His brief tryst with kindness for Jasmine and angst at how people were being butchered could be attributed more to his recent traumatizing separation from his wife and not to his inherent goodness. Marcos was destined to go back to his bourgeoisie values and his interpellation back into this ideological apparatus dovetails with his class. Eagleton believes that it is important to keep a text faithful to reality. “Naïve utopian ideology” and fairy tale endings are hardly the norm in real life. What matters are the “realistic force and truthful portrayals” of fiction and how it brings to the foreground the class conflict and exploitation taking place in real life through pen and paper (39).

It does not do well to dwell on trying to pry out Marcos’s motivations behind this last moment metamorphosis or as discussed above, his return to his bourgeoisie status. Bazterrica understands that class reigns supreme in such an overtly inhumane and opportunistic version of capitalism. She daftly weaves a story where we root for Marcos and Jasmine to make it and achieve their ‘happily-ever-after’ but it proves to be too naïve and gullibly optimistic because if one is to survive this class conflict where the proletariat are straight up consumed, Marcos had to reassert his status as the member of the ruling class. Marcos’s true intentions and feelings about the illegitimate baby he’s about to have with “a female specimen” have been peppered by Bazterrica throughout the novel. During his dinner with Urlet and Guerrero Iraolo, Marcos thinks to himself how he has committed a most serious crime but he does not care as “the child is going to be his” (117). Nowhere is he concerned with the well-being of Jasmine after this child comes into the world and his concerns are not limited to protecting himself and his unborn baby. All that he does for Jasmine is either to make his crimes against her seem more digestible to himself; by humanizing her, he lies to himself that he has done no wrong. All the precautions he takes to keep her safe and comfortable are due to her being the mother of his unborn baby and not because she is a human being. Bazterrica concludes her work with the chilling declaration that Marcos had always been the one in control. Jasmine stops being a person and is simply a “female” and Marcos speaks of her thus – “she had the human look of a domesticated animal” (165).

CONCLUSION

As we have discovered so far, the world of *Tender is the Flesh* is not so different from ours; in fact, it may serve as a grotesque reflection of our world. Insert literature as a mirror

reference. The fetishization of special meat, the reification of all relations whose epicenter is the revered special meat, and the reduction of all transactions, whether they be social or monetary are governed by access to meat. In our world, this meat can be easily substituted with money. The hyperbolic representation is characterized by a marked exaggeration and overt symbolism. In Bazterrica's work, everything is amplified exponentially – the obsession with consumption, the fear, the suffering, the disconnect, the exploitation, and finally, death. A peek through the Marxist lens only begins to scratch the surface of what Tender is the Flesh has to offer. Nonetheless, this paper has attempted to unearth how government and corporations work hand in glove to ensure consumption does not come to a halt and to keep resistance to a minimum. The people are alienated from themselves and their nature of consumption and continue to revel in the decadence being offered to them by capitalistic structures. The hegemonic control is utterly completely, with no chinks its armour. The conclusion of the novel also leaves no room for doubt and seals the fate of this cannibalistic dystopian world.

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