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## LIFE IN EAST EUROPEAN LITERATURE

**SHEELA BASKAR**

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**Abstract:** Following the end of THE SECOND WORLD WAR, Europe has been divided between East and West, the East being under the control of Soviet Russia. The expression “Iron Curtain” refers to the guns, tanks and other armaments and also physical barriers with which the Soviets enforced their control. Fear ruled the people during this period. In East Europe, this is also the period of great illusions and of broken dreams. Solzhenitsyn, a great writer turned the conflict in Europe into good and evil; so also others. During this period, the system forced people to live a lie, to profess what they did not believe. The least capable ones are rewarded and the able and the talented ones were rejected.

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**Introduction:** The famous lines of Robert Fisher in ‘To find a poem’ begin like this:

To find a poem  
Listen to the wind  
Whispering words strange and rare  
Look under stones  
There you might find the fossil  
Shape of an old poem.  
They turn up anywhere  
In the most unexpected places...

This poem ends with a final note that our poem which is lost somewhere in the dark ‘may be waiting for you.’

Everyday is a struggle, struggle between good and evil, struggle for the betterment of future, struggle to mend our broken dreams. Franz Kafka quoted, ‘you’re capable of loving. Only fear excites you.’ The literature of East Europe no doubt sprang out from one such climate. A former regional President of Procter & Gamble rightly put it: ‘Diversity and turbulence was a feature of the region; diversity of cultures, languages, religions between rich and poor, war and peace.’ The literature of East Europe apart from narrating the war and peace, rich and poor people, powerful and powerless, it details about the volumes and volumes of fear, excitement and wrapped with stories of dreadful bloodshed and burnt ashes. It also deals with the Empire behind the wall, which was mentioned by the ‘Evil Empire.’ It is also the Empire of ‘Stalinist tyranny’ ‘of great illusions’, ‘of broken dreams.’ East European countries were battered and shattered after the Second World War. In ‘Down the Danube’, the writer Peter Esterhazy portrayed the clear picture of Post-war countries. ‘The terrible Turks, the awful Austrians, the trickery of Trianon, the indifference of the English and to cap it all: the Russians, oh, outrageous fortune. But wasn’t this really just an average European destiny? Now and again countries disappeared from the map, were shunted around like furniture and sooner or later came the Russians. We have no special cause to feel sorry for ourselves.’

People had to fight with its tyrannical power where fear alone became ones’ day-today companion where tragedies did happen on regular basis in an unimaginable fashion. When some literary persons like Solzhenitsyn viewed this struggle as a conflict between good and evil, there are people who bore this humiliation heroically. When political situation turned out to be sour and hopeless, when power was exclusively in the hands of few men, pretension and lies dominated the public life in all Soviet bloc countries. The air was filled with the hoarse voices of disagreement and criticism. The writer Slavenka Drakulic, after spending some time with her family, travelled in the Balkan Express to reach Croatia. As she stepped into the building in the South Station of Vienna, she found herself hearing some men cursing someone’s mother in Serbian and found familiar sour odour, a mixture of urine, beer and plastic-covered seats in second-class rail compartments. War, she writes here, has changed the language of Croats and Serbians. When she opened her newspaper, she could read the atrocities of war which froze her blood. In Borba, the Newspaper, one of the dailies of Serbia, as there were no papers from Croatia, it was printed like this: “ ... and we looked down the well in the backyard. We pulled up the bucket – it was full of testicles, about 300 in all.” To the writer nothing seemed to shatter her, not even “the dismembered bodies, not autopsy reports from Croatian doctors claiming that the victims were forced by Serbians to eat their own eyes before they were killed.

Writers like Ivan Klima were summoned and interrogated in a grey room and were forced not to disseminate any suspected anti-state document. But the empire was partially successful because the shrewd ones managed to smuggle the manuscripts to western parts of Europe. People of independent thinking were wrapped up by a loveless world, reined by malice, fear and denials. When the writers of the other parts of the world tried to turn out the gory picture of this world into a glamorous one by writing about it, People in this Evil Empire became

philosophical and everything was not only just a struggle between good and Evil for them; but it was considered to be a clash between the powers of God and Satan. Of course the 'bipolarity of a world' strengthened this view. The allegorical poem titled 'Dialectics' of Michael Stammell and Venno Taufer translated by Edward Kocbeck explains this clearly:

The builder demolishes houses,  
The doctor advances death  
And the chief of the fire brigade  
Is the arsonist's secret leader?

Clever dialectics say so

And the bible says something similar:

He who is highest shall be lowest  
and he who is last shall be first.

Time blunted the unsavoury situation of this revolutionary period namely the administration of fanatics, plunged to murder in the name of anti-state statements. When we review the history of East European literature, we are discouraged and disappointed by the fact that the rule of fanatics was followed by the rule of bureaucrats who insisted on some rules that allowed most people to continue with their lives due to their adaptation. Hanna Krall portrayed the life of a terrorist that liked the violence of Hitler's camps to the Red Army faction. She wrote in this story that the Government handled the terrorists ruthlessly. In Prison Stefan W. read books by Bartoszewski, Moczarski and the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz. 'Eastern Europe?' said Stefan-W., quietly and thoughtfully. 'Well, Europe, one more failed experiment. The idea lives on, and millions still dwell in poverty.' This piece delivers a total condemnation of the characters towards Capitalism.

So many great writers like Peter Esterhazy, Pawel Huelle started to concentrate not on the members of the secret police or corrupt Party Secretaries but on the ordinary people, their love and hate, life and suffering—the suffering of mothers, fathers, wives, mistresses and husbands. The story 'Mina' by Pawel Huelle highlights the sufferings of the people; the men in the small Silesian town which is close to the German border, 'died very regularly before the age of sixty.' The women regularly bore children in the interval between cooking and working on three shifts. The young men either went away from this town or went down the mines. Mina, the beautiful motherless girl was raped in the park by the Russian Soldier and was aborted for her unwanted pregnancy and was disowned by her father. She later on became schizophrenic and was admitted in the hospital till eternity for leading a loveless life. Readers often found solace in such stories - the only time they felt at peace and absence of fear.

It is this experience of totalitarianism –a system which demanded its people to live a lie, to believe in

what they did not believe, stopping them from what they wanted to believe. In 'The Beauty of History' Viivi Luik revealed how people lived in lie and pretence. The phone stayed under the cushion which could not be used until the secret language had been learned. One should remember that one should not use the words 'book', 'paper', 'documents', 'briefcase', 'letter' or 'men'. A briefcase gave away the fact that it was an effort to move from one place to another. Men's names should be changed to women and Paris should be changed to Kiev, New York to Moscow. Words like Aunt Olga, the poly-clinic, cabbages and beets were allowed. Time should be mentioned and the word 'night' should not be mentioned. 'If you wish to say: 'I'm coming next Wednesday evening at night', then say: 'Aunt Olga will send Mum those eight black coat buttons she asked for, next Wednesday. Learning and excelling in the art of secret language saved the citizens' lives and unpleasant experience. This hypocritical system showered all the privileges upon the least capable people while the most talented ones were disregarded and rejected.

Writers were constantly watched and tortured for their talents. The following lines of Lajos Grendel in 'The contents of suitcases' give the readers a chilling picture on the destiny of the writers. 'No sooner had I set forth from home than I noticed I was being followed. I was somewhat surprised that I had found my way on to the list of 'observed persons', as these days I avoided publicity and lived only for my family and vocation. I hadn't moved in society for ages, or written articles for the papers. Even when from time to time a book of mine appeared, it hardly caused a stir. Rack my brains as I might, I simply couldn't remember a single incriminating act, or even the pettiest of offences that might have aroused the suspicion of the authorities... I had never been one to contrive dark schemes to bring about the down fall of my greater or lesser superiors'. The reason for the refusal of rewards is due to the fear of system towards art. It was viewed to be a very powerful weapon of educating and influencing 'the masses.' Artists were considered to be manipulative and cynical. In the beginning, these threatening elements of the society were either murdered or imprisoned; later on, they were banned. The rulers exaggerated the significance of the written word and the unpleasant experiences of censorship that followed by trials and tribulations for the artists, led them to disillusionment and a growing void between artists and political power.

The gulf between the arts and political power is nothing but a blessing in disguise as they started to enjoy favours from the public who started to form long queues in front of bookshops on publication days. Thus the deprivation of the writers' freedom

returned to them in the form of experience. The experience, that is, their gifts came to them in dark, rough packages. Of course it is their true genuine

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Sheela Baskar/Associate Prof. Of English /  
Government Ram Narayan Chellaram College of Commerce and Management/ Palace Road/  
Bangalore/ Karnataka