

# The Forbidden Fruit of Romania: An Analysis of Herta Müller's *The Land of Green Plums*

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MĂREȚA SĂRBĂTOARE A ELIBERĂRII PATRIEI NOASTRE DE CĂTRE GLORIOASA ARMATĂ SOVIETICĂ !

Trăiască 23 August [Postcard/propaganda print showing Romanian-Soviet liberation scene]. Romania, circa 1950s.

## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, Eastern Europe continually suffered through great strife, whether due to foreign invasions and world wars, domestic political coups, or the rise and eventual collapse of socialism in the Eastern Bloc. The countries of Eastern Europe were particularly affected by World War II and its aftermath. As the Allies carved up Europe in their own likeness, transforming it into what it is today, the Soviet Union oversaw nation-building and development in the region it liberated from Nazi Occupation, which became the nations of the Eastern Bloc. While these nations have adopted distinct ideologies and economic systems over the last forty years, the marks of socialism run deep within them and will continue to be felt for generations to come.

Herta Müller's *The Land of Green Plums* is a novel that delves into the true nature of Eastern Bloc socialist regimes and highlights their moral conundrums, leaving the reader to decide for themselves. Müller's novel takes place in Romania during the reign of Nicolae Ceaușescu, a dictator

known for his exceptionally cruel rule, and tells the story of a group of young adults belonging to a German minority trying to find their place in the world. The novel can be viewed as Müller's way of expressing herself during her time in Romania, as well as an overall critique of the society in which she lived. This paper examines the life of Herta Müller, focusing on the themes of youth, identity, and individualism, and relating them to both themes in her novel and the actual life experiences of this time period. The primary objective of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of Herta Müller's life and works. At the same time, this paper aims to help contemporary readers recognize similar signs of stress in their own societies, and to serve as a reminder to the present that our sacred liberties require constant moral courage to uphold against oppressive appetites that would consume them.

## Herta Müller's Background and Style

Alienation has always followed Müller as a result of her mixed heritage. Her father was an SS member

during WWII, and her mother was a victim of one of Stalin's forced labor camps. Essentially, all that she and her immediate family knew about the Romanian government was how to survive within a dictatorship. As a teenager, she was heavily involved in writing and began publishing her works in high school and university newspapers while also participating in various literary circles. Not long after embarking on this path as a writer to express her feelings and discontent with Romanian society, the *Securitate*, or secret police of Romania, began to harass Müller and her friends.<sup>1</sup> A common feature of former socialist countries was the suppression of the arts, especially works that critiqued society. Müller experienced firsthand what it was like to be accused and constantly targeted by state officials. Out of fear of being labeled a traitor, she ultimately had to flee the country for her safety. In 1987, Müller migrated to Germany (West Berlin at the time) to escape political persecution and to connect with a culture she believed to be most similar to her own. Yet, a lingering sense of isolation remained. Although she was ethnically German, she had grown up in a completely different culture and under a distinct political, social, and economic system. Her departure from Romania and her enduring sense of alienation marked the beginning of her most influential works, which soon became widespread in Western, non-socialist countries. As literary critic Brigid Haines writes, Müller's work served to "memorialize the experience" of socialism's victims throughout the Eastern Bloc, particularly in Romania, by providing a "formal expression to the terror" of life during the Ceaușescu era.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Watson, Jenny. "Herta Müller." *Institute of Languages, Cultures & Societies*. Accessed November 6, 2024, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Haines, Brigid. "Humanity in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt and Herta Müller." *German Life and Letters* 73 (1) 2020: 158.

The state of Romania during the Ceaușescu era can be described as a dark point in its history. After amassing an enormous national debt, the country initiated a mass export campaign in hopes of paying it off, which caused disturbances in the agricultural and industrial sectors. The results of these economic policies included "extreme shortages in food, fuel, energy, medicines," and other everyday necessities for the population.<sup>3</sup> By directing resources toward industrial goods for export and crops to feed foreign populations in exchange for currency, the already impoverished Romanian countryside experienced increasingly dangerous levels of poverty. This is made especially clear in the depiction of the youth, as described by the narrator of *The Land of Green Plums*: the children's insides "suffer from diarrhea" while their "outsides from scrapes and lice."<sup>4</sup> Prolonged diarrhea often results from a malnourished diet, further evidenced by lingering wounds that fail to heal. While the narrator and her friends are not in such dire conditions, the sight of children only slightly younger than them evokes frustration and helplessness.

Public transportation and other government services were similarly affected. By the 1980s, "horse-drawn wagons" were moving faster "than the buses" in a country whose ideology prided itself on technological advancement.<sup>5</sup> This stark contrast left the younger generation feeling isolated within their own society. There was a lack of direction for the youth, as they could not look toward the future with hope when living standards continued to decline.

<sup>3</sup> Karpinski, Kenneth, "Nicolae Ceaușescu," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicolae-Ceausescu>.

<sup>4</sup> Müller, Herta, *The Land of Green Plums*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York City, New York: Picador, 2010) 85.

<sup>5</sup> Müller, *Green Plums*, 84.

Müller critiques and reflects on the impact of socialist Romania on youth by presenting a narrator who looks back on life during this time and recalls how they once assumed such conditions were normal. Unfortunately, this bleak existence was the reality for many until the end of Ceaușescu's reign. Even though Romania has since improved, there remains an older generation fully aware of how their country once was, while their youth has largely been forgotten.

Despite the mass population exchanges, more commonly known as "ethnic cleansing" operations, carried out in the twentieth century, many places within Eastern Europe remained culturally diverse, with Romania being one of them. Romania has been part of various empires over the past two millennia, from the Roman and Greek empires to the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires in the early twentieth century. These historical influences brought people of different religions, races, and ethnicities to reside within its territory. However, during the socialist period, the state ideology shifted toward a more nationalist identity, ultimately alienating large groups of its population. According to researcher Valentin Nicolescu, the government increasingly emphasized Romanian-born, Romanian-speaking citizens as the innovators and artists of society. At the same time, those not considered Romanian were deemed unable to guide it.<sup>6</sup> This created a question of whether one could conform to the Romanian identity, and if not, what the identity of a non-Romanian would be. Because of their German ancestry, the narrator and her friends struggle to see themselves as part of Romanian society. The narrator's struggle to integrate stems from two reasons: first, no matter how hard they tried, certain

indicators, such as their "Swabian" accents, set them apart. Second, in an act of protest, the narrator and her friends refused to join the socialist society they endured. Those who conformed to the state-sponsored culture were labeled "plumsuckers," and the "green plums" they ate symbolized their participation in the establishment.<sup>7</sup> By refusing to eat the plums, the narrator and her friends exemplify a subtle act of resistance against the oppressive regime, choosing not to abandon their culture. By maintaining their uniqueness, the narrator and her friends face discriminatory practices from both the state and its citizens. Yet, this resistance proves worthwhile; since they cannot fully integrate into society, their identity becomes partly defined by their opposition to the status quo. Müller uses this refusal as a powerful symbol of cultural preservation and defiance against a system that sought to erase individuality.

As a result of the regime change in Romania after WWII, the socialist state began a process of collectivization across the arts and sciences. Influence from the Soviet system shaped a similar agenda, enforced by organizations such as the Ministry of Arts and Information and the Ministry of Education.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, the state dictated what was considered appropriate expression among the population and suppressed anything deemed "anti-communist." Literature, history, newspapers, and most forms of media were censored and rewritten under the pretense of progress, with those found in possession of older publications facing potential charges. This led to a cultural and social crisis, where the average citizen was forced to "scrape and claw" for the "existential minimum," as the historian Trond Gilbert wrote.<sup>9</sup> Amid the struggles of youth trying to find their

<sup>6</sup> Nicolescu, Valentin Quintus. "Nature and Identity in the Construction of the Romanian Concept of Nation." *Environment and History* 20, no. 1 (2014): 135.

<sup>7</sup> Müller, *Green Plums*, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Vasile, Cristian. "Propaganda and Culture in Romania at the Beginning of the Communist Regime." In *Stalinism Revisited: The*

*Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, edited by Vladamir Tismaneanu, (Central European University Press), 2009, 373.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert, Trond. "Romania's Growing Difficulties." *Current History* 83, no. 496 (1984): 376.

way in a broken system and non-Romanians trying to discover their identity, individuality was stifled, not only in actions but also in thoughts, as the state sought to enforce correct thinking.

After the suicide of her fellow schoolmate, Lola is expelled from the university and Communist Party, since her death was considered to be a disdainful act and representation of their society. Even though the whole class “felt like crying” when it was announced that Lola had been an enemy of the state, “everyone applauded.”<sup>10</sup> Any refusal to obey the party’s declaration could bring serious consequences to those who felt differently about Lola. This method of enforced collective obedience is something Müller is highly critical of, and nowhere is it more evident than in the interrogation between the narrator and Captain Pjele. During the interrogation, as Captain Pjele begins a dehumanizing inventory of all of the contraband found in the narrator’s possession, the narrator creates her own mental inventory of things that cannot be confiscated from her, her memories of Lola and reminiscences of their childhood, “to counter Captain Pjele’s list.”<sup>11</sup> While this act holds no tangible value in the moment, it represents a crucial point of resistance. The narrator establishes that, no matter what challenges she faces or what forms of social and cultural eradication are directed at her, the party will never infiltrate her mind. Müller uses the mind as a sanctuary for consciousness, a space that separates the individual from the oppressive authority of the state. It is the indomitable part of her character that cannot be “re-educated” and will always resist the machinery of the state.

### Conclusion

*The Land of Green Plums* is a timely novel that explores themes of individuality, identity, and youth in authoritarian regimes. While the novel is a work of

<sup>10</sup> Müller, *Green Plums*, 25.

fiction, many of its prevalent themes trace their origins to Romania during its socialist period. The exact events of the story may not have happened, but Müller’s contemporaries share similar memories and feelings of what it was like to live during that time. Müller crafts a narrative drawn from her own experiences, offering audiences worldwide a glimpse into what she endured. The state's inability to provide even basic necessities like food and power resulted in malnourished and underdeveloped populations. Inadequate public services also had a lasting impact on the country’s youth, plunging them into despair as their lives seemed destined for fruitlessness. On top of this, Müller, like her narrator, experienced harassment by the *Securitate*, constant degradation by those in power, and ruthless tactics used to strip the population of any means of individuality. Since her teenage years, Müller was drawn to writing, but it was never a sustainable way for her to express herself freely. The dangers of openly criticizing the state were potentially fatal. Thus, when Müller left Romania, her style reflected the cautiousness of someone who had once had to carefully navigate self-expression to avoid incrimination.

When a multicultural state adopts a nationalist mindset, it further isolates minority populations, forcing them to question their identities. They must either erase their heritage to conform or take pride in their diversity and resist assimilation. The suppression of arts, sciences, and education further stifles individuality, as the state imposes an agenda of collective obedience over both mind and body. Müller places her narrator in these circumstances, using her actions and reflections to critique the society in which she once lived. The narrator’s retrospective view of her impoverished life, which once felt normal, highlights its absurdity and reveals how youth become disenfranchised in a regressive society. By choosing to maintain her German culture and

<sup>11</sup> Müller, *Green Plums*, 135.

eventually migrating to Germany, the narrator, like Müller herself, escapes the Romanian ideals imposed upon her. In a meaningful and symbolic gesture, the narrator also refuses to let the state have complete control over her sense of self. She preserves what little individuality she has left by ensuring that her conscience remains untouched, establishing an unbreakable boundary. Ultimately, Müller's novel is more than just the story of a group of teenagers trying to find themselves in an authoritarian society. It embodies the experiences of both the everyday citizens who lived through this tragic period in history and serves to guide and inspire those who continue to live under such circumstances today.

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