

Reflection of the Spanish Civil War in the Novels of Mercedes Rodoreda: A Study

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Abstract:

By nature, war is considered as a destroyer of peace and harbinger of sorrow and pain. War is a forewarning of poverty, crimes, fear and death. War is generally characterized by extreme violence, aggression, destruction and mortality. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "War is a state of armed conflict between states, government societies or informal paramilitary groups such as mercenaries, insurgents and militias". (901)

*This research paper aims to present a brief introduction to the Spanish Civil War and its reflections in Mercedes Rodoreda's novels: *The Time of the Doves*, *Death in Spring* and *War, So Much War*. This paper tries to identify the plight of the Spanish Civil War and its brutal effects on the life of Catalonia. The paper follows analytical method by presenting the instances and actions of the story which are directly and indirectly showcase the war affected zone of Catalonia.*

Keywords: *Harbinger, aggression, paramilitary, Spanish civil war, Catalonia*

Introduction

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was viewed as class struggle, a war of religion, a struggle between dictatorship and republican democracy and between fascism and communism. The war was fought between the republicans and the nationalists, an alliance of Falangists, Monarchists, conservatives and Catholics under the leadership of General Francisco Franco. By capturing of the Spain's coastline, Catalonia, Madrid and Barcelona, Franco entered the capital and declared victory on 1 April, 1939. Franco established his dictatorship and the Spain region was fused into the structure of the Franco regime. Because of the war, more than ten lakh civilians and people lost their lives through bombardment, execution and assassination. Large number of women and children became orphans. The people also died of malnutrition, starvation and war-generated diseases.

Catalonia was as war affected considered to be a war affected zone in Spain. At present Catalonia is an autonomous community on the north-eastern corner of Spain, self-designated as a nationality by its statute of

Autonomy. In the 19th century Catalonia was severely affected by the Napoleonic and carlist wars. In 1914, the four Catalan provinces formed a commonwealth and with the return of democracy during the second Spanish Republic (1931-1936) the Generalitat of Catalonia was restored as an autonomous government. After the Spanish civil war, the Franco dictatorship enacted repressive measures, abolishing Catalan self-government and banning the official use of Catalan language. The first ten-year rule was violent, autocratic, and repressive in political, cultural, social and economic sense. In Catalonia any kind of public activities associated with Catalan nationalism, republicanism, democracy including the publication of books on those subjects or discussion of them in open meetings were banned.

Mercedes Rodoreda was one of the exiled writers of Catalonia during the Franco regime. Due to her rationale and democratic writings, she was exiled in France and later Switzerland. As Mercedes Rodoreda has experienced the world wars and the Spanish Civil War and exile, she has understood the sufferings at two levels, one as a woman

and the other as a writer. Rodoreda's life during the period of war has given her a sensitive and practical approach towards the life of confinement and agony as she represented in her works. Being a writer, she wants to dispel terrible memories of the war and she uses her novels as a raising voice against the flaws of the dictatorship and an emotional outlet.

The research paper analyses Merce Rodoreda's novels *The Time of the Doves*, *War So Much War* and *Death in Spring* with reference to the Spanish Civil War. The analysis aims to find the effects of the Spanish Civil War on the life of Catalonia, who are the victims of the war and how it is represented in the novels.

The Time of the Doves is written in 1962 and Rodoreda's first novel to be translated into English as *The Pigeon Girl* or *In Diamond Square* by David Rosenthal in 1986. It revolves around the status of woman during and after the war. The novel projects womanliness by presenting the nature and responsibilities of a mother. The writer has observed the change of woman's role in a war affected family. The social order has been rocked by the war with women becoming key economic supporters in the absence of men. The writer has brought this social change through the character of the novel Natalia. The story records the sufferings and struggles of Natalia, who represents the plight of a mother along with her two children after losing her husband in the civil war. Rodoreda presents the life of widowhood and orphaned state of woman by showing how war has disturbed the life of a stereotypical woman. Rodoreda does not present a woman with boldness but picturizes the condition of naïve woman under the war created haphazardness.

The Time of the Doves novel is set at Barcelona, Catalonia with the background of the Spanish Civil War. The story revolves around the life of Natalia and Quimet and his friends and the change in the life of women.

The Spanish Civil War has created a change in the life of women. After the announcement of the war, thousands of militiamen were moved to the front, women had to take over the jobs in order to achieve economic independence and to run their families during the Spanish Civil War.

By nature, Quimet is a stubborn and has slippery nature. He has neglected his responsibilities as a husband and a father of children. Without worrying about his wife and children, he joins the Republican Movement at the time of Spanish Civil War. Because of the war, the wood work began to slow up and Quimet's carpentry work has stopped and he failed to provide basic needs to his family. As the situation went on becoming worse, Natalia thought to work as a maid against Quimet's wish. In the meantime, the war rises to the peak level in Barcelona, Quimet sacrifices his family for the sake of the war and independence from the dictatorship of fascism. Natalia astonished by the act of Quimet and she felt as follows:

.... with little headaches, till the Republic came and Quimet got all excited and went marching through the streets shouting and waving a flag. I never could figure out where he got it from. (*The Time of the Doves*, 70)

Quimet was mixed up in it too and every time he went out, I thought maybe one day he wouldn't come back. (*The Time of the Doves*, 114)

And the war events created a breach between the Republicans and the aristocratic families. The Republicans have tried to loot and threaten the life of aristocratic families, as they support the dictatorship of Franco. Because of Quimet's involvements in the republican freedom activities, Natalia is fired out from her work by the aristocratic family.

In order to provide safety and food to her son Antoni, she sends him to the refugee camp and saved her daughter by keeping her with her. Natalia's life has been getting worse because of all her loved ones her father, step mother, husband and his friends are dead and she becomes alone.

Natalia is left alone to starve to death with her children. Barcelona was completely destroyed in every manner of socio-economic plight. Natalia searches for job in vain and she sells everything to buy food and survive. But her trials failed and children have become victims of malnutrition as they left with starvation.

Before selling Father Joan's two coins I sold everything else: the embroidered sheets, the good dishes, the silverware.... I could barely buy food because I had almost no money and because there was no food to buy.

The milk was milk less. They said the meat, when there was any, was horse meat. (*The Time of the Doves*, 141)

The war has created the situation where the mother becomes a killer of her own children by poisoning. Natalia is not a resistant and courageous woman, because she tries to commit suicide along with her children after losing her all belongings during the war. But the novel narrates it in positive manner and represents maternal nature of Natalia and her progression from mere submissiveness to personal maturity and strength. But the woman gets hope by the entry of Antony, a shop keeper and a victim of the war, into her life. Antony marries her and takes care of her children as his. Being a benevolent in nature, Natalia has become a supporter to Antony as well as she has succeeded in providing of a good life to her fatherless children.

Merce Rodoreda's another novel *War, So Much War* is not a simple record of the cause and effects of the Spanish Civil War, but the way the people lived, felt, used and transformed during and after the war. The novel examines the Spanish battle front showing the visceral pain of war inflicted on the bodies and minds of soldiers, as well as the residual effects on their families and societies. Rodoreda has used 15-year-old boy named Adria as her witness and mouthpiece to describe the cruelty of the war. The writer represented it in a pessimistic and gloom-ridden view. The protagonist of the novel is not presented in a heroic manner. Adria is vulnerable boy, whose journey throughout the war region exposes him to the sufferings and pain of the soldiers. The terrific nature of the war has delineated through the death of soldiers, injured soldiers' worthless life at the front.

Rodoreda has brought the protagonist from the rural, and agricultural background and who fears and tries to escape from the front many times in search of peaceful life. The novel is glorified and dominated by the images like the mortality of soldiers, physically handicapped soldiers and the sufferings of the families. It presents the sacrifice and the sufferings of the youth and aged. The war displaces people, and those people are often society's most vulnerable such as the elderly, the poor, the children. Throughout the novel, the writer is trying to create the moral, social and psychological sensibilities by portraying

the life of sacrifice and distress of the youth during the Spanish Civil War. Rodoreda is not supporting the war, but she wants to promote humanitarian values against the humiliations of the war. Adria's quest for peace reminds the Catalans' search for peace and freedom during the war.

Death in Spring is published in Catalan as *la mort I la Primavera* in 1986 and is translated into English by Martha Tennen in 2009. It is a story of an unnamed village; the anonymous narrator has represented the different kinds of inhuman activities in a fictionalized village near the Maraldina mountain.

The novel revolves around the life of common people of the village with significant characters such as: the unnamed narrator, the old senyor, the blacksmith and his son, the cement man, the stepmother and the prisoner. The unnamed narrator forces himself to find out the answers for some mysterious practices and inhuman activities of the village. The narrator finds out the violent customs and traditions which are imposed on the people in direct and indirect manners. He tells about the violent rituals like hiding the dead in trees, filling the dying mouths with cement to prevent the escape of the soul from body, selecting and sending a man to swim in the river in order to discover whether the village will be saved or washed away by the flood and the ill treatment of the prisoner.

Being a victim of the terrific rule of fascism, Rodoreda delineates the power of Francoism over Catalonia indirectly by mentioning the hardship of the people under the irrational beliefs and practices. The characters of the prisoner and the unnamed narrator represent the sufferings of the revolutionaries during the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship of Franco. The people of Catalonia have led their life without asking and raising questions against the suppressing regime in the fear of punishment and exile/excommunication from the country. Suffering of the people is caused by the rule and restrictions of the blacksmith. It remembers the rule of General Franco and the Unitarian policy of Spain on Catalonia. The works and liberal thoughts of the writers and radicals are prohibited in the country at the time of regime and Rodoreda herself is not exempted from this suffering and resentment. The novel is very symbolic and it

shows Catalans' life under the administration of the Francoism.

Conclusion

Merce Rodoreda's works cannot be validated with specific facts but must be seen as an accurate depiction of experience of Catalans. Her works focus on the trauma the people experienced during the war and the Franco's regime. Rodoreda sheds light on the disorienting senselessness of war and its far-reaching ability to physically and mentally fragmented individuals. In doing so, the novels seek to understand and humanize the inherently dehumanizing effects of war.

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