Aerial Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*: A Reading of Foucauldian Discursive Strategy and Post-dictatorial Traumatic Expression

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**Abstract**: The context of Latin America is vibrant and politically charged. The places like Mexico and Cuba have experienced US’s imperial mission and the countries like Chile, Argentina and Peru have suffered years of dictatorship. But since 90’s these countries started achieving democratic rule, offering little redemption for the past horrors. Set in the backdrop of transition to democracy from Augusto Pinochet’s regime of dictatorship in Chile, Aerial Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* raises some vital questions about the role and nature of this new-born democracy and the truth commission and their sober dictatorial policy in the guise of democracy. Taking this cue, the paper tries to explore how the state’s failure to give proper justice to its citizens compel and entangle the former victim and victimizer into a discursive relation where a metaphorically specular role-reversal occurs based on physical punishment and personal revenge in consequence with a traumatic expression.

**Keywords**: Foucauldian Discursive strategy, Post-dictatorial Traumatic Expression, Truth Commission, Chile

1. Introduction

*Death and the Maiden* is a play by Chilean playwright, novelist and human rights activist Aerial Dorfman who has also written several novels and short stories like *The Empire’s Old Cloths*, *Exorcising Terror*, *My House is on Fire* and others. Dorfman’s play *Death and the Maiden* explores the painful process that a country undergoes in its transition to democracy after suffering from years of dictatorship. It has only three characters and the central character is a woman named Paulina Salas who has suffered severe torture and rape fifteen years ago (when she was in prison) due to his underground resistance activities against the regime. This devastating past has a greater impact on the present lives of the characters especially upon that of the protagonist.

Taking this woman’s agonized past as the basis of the play the playwright has made a search of the truth in a setting fraught with dictatorship (Augusto Pinochet era in Chile, Latin America) and having its transition to democracy. From here we move onto more general issues that include both personal and political. The play brings up a situation in which the victim, the torturer and the mediator-the three characters in the play-have a perfect confrontation with each other and the stage becomes, in the typical Foucauldian way, the perfect interplay of contrasting and counterpointing discourses. The play employs several defamiliarising techniques which help us to interpret the play subjectively. Here we explore the postmodern notions on language, which reject any totalizing or universal truth or a single authorial intension in this work. Not only that this paper attempts to investigate the process of the country’s transition from dictatorship to democracy, the co-existence of the victims and the victimizers, the condition of those powerless and marginalized but also analyzes the quality and reliability of the state-sponsored justice-system in this new democratic regime. It also explores the role of trauma in the life of the tortured and the process of overcoming it through language.

2. Interplay of Alternative Discourses

On the outset of the play one can see how the three alternative discourses posited by the three characters in the play are constructed and counterpointed and the defamiliarising techniques employed here involve both the readers/spectators and the characters in dealing with the issues presented in the play. Moreover, the symbolical progress of the woman-from hiding in a corner to the controlling the action will be analyzed in order to grasp the “truth” in the play’s pivotal discourse. The play revolves around the three different discourses presented by the three characters-a woman whose name is Paulina Salas, her husband Gerardo Escobar and a doctor named Roberto Miranda. It begins when Gerardo’s car broke down...
midway and he was given a lift by a stranger whom Paulina identifies as the doctor who systematically raped and tortured her fifteen years ago. Soon it becomes a deadly confrontation between the victim, the mediator and the supposed torturer. Gerardo is the newly appointed president of the commission committed to investigate the past crimes and is therefore the recipient of institutionalized discourses. Also by profession Gerardo is a lawyer and therefore articulates with cool efficiency the official version that has to pass off as the truth—the discursive practice which the nation has to believe as the truth. In order to keep and exert power, Gerardo constructs the new government’s interpretation of the past and attempts to control any subversive discourse by extolling moderation and equanimity. His official status even enables him to promise that the human rights violations ending in death or the presumption of death will be objectively investigated and although not every criminal will be punished, there will be some sort of moral sanction and the conclusions will be officially published. In a word the president of the new investigating commission sets up a new discursive practice of forgiveness and compromise which the country has to abide by in order to enable the new regime to start a period of peace and prosperity. Hence Escobar states “our country never again live through those excesses . . .” (Dorfman, Death and the Maiden 7). In contrast, the victim Paulina’s discourse argues back, questioning the final purpose of so empty efficiency that solely aims at compromise and negotiation. Furthermore she exposes the manipulative stratagem of the present government granting themselves amnesty and the final exoneration of the past regime. Yet at the end of act 1 scene iii the main issue becomes not ‘justice’ on a national scale but revenge on a personal level. A drastic power control shift occurs in this scene. One can clearly see in this scene that Paulina has tied Dr Miranda to a chair and has gagged him by stuffing her own pants into his mouth, a mirror reflection of an allegedly past scene (albeit not presented in the text but unfolded through Paulina account) enacted by both Paulina and Dr Miranda. The only fundamental difference lies in the fact that in perfect mirroring focalization their roles have been reversed and this reversal has dramatically changed Paulina’s discursive practice.

The text-stage therefore reverses the patriarchal ideology that assigns a subordinate position to women and heightens her physically and metaphorically central position. In contrast to the official discourse of compromise and forgiveness the former victim articulates a new discursive practice based on physical punishment and personal revenge. Her subversive discourse gradually overpowers the official legal discourse of moderation and control. Moreover, Paulina assumes the sexually bold postures—one example is when she has gagged Dr Miranda by stuffing her own pants into his mouth (Dorfman, Death and the Maiden 15). The way she handles her alleged torturer violates the prevailing standards of social acceptability and the most significant example is when she accompanies Roberto to the bathroom (Dorfman, Death and the Maiden 23). But it must be remembered that Paulina’s firm directives are effectively backed by her gun. So the question that may raise itself is whether it is the gun that places her in the position of power or it is her discursive strategies that give her the agency. Also the fact that needs special attention is that how can a marginal discourse so easily and immediately occupy such a central position? To answer these questions we must take refuge to Foucault’s notion of ‘power’ and ‘resistance.’ According to Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 1: 95), meaning that despite the co-extensiveness between discourses and movements of power the socially and historically constructed subjects are not wholly disempowered but are endowed with the capacity for resistance and for generating effective political action, thereby giving way to the possibilities of bringing about change.

However, the third discursive practice present in the text is that of the supposed torturer. When Dr Miranda is hit and tied to a chair, gagged and threatened with a gun he adopts a combative discursive practice and starts by steadfastly denying all the charges brought against him by Paulina and thereby deftly tries to disempower Paulina’s dominant discourse. In keeping with his profession, he diagnoses the woman’s “madness” and thereby her illegibility for having access to knowledge and truth and ultimately her ability to exert power. Dr Miranda says to Paulina: “I have never seen you before in my life. But I can tell you this: you are extremely ill, almost prototypically schizoid” (Dorfman, Death and the Maiden 23). Feminist theory has explained that patriarchy in almost all societies aims to exclude women from the production of speech and the generation of meaning and women are made to blindly follow the social roles prescribed by the male member of the society. But when a woman refuses to conform to her socially-assigned roles of dependency and submission, she risks being defined as “mad”. The figure of the blindfold in this play also symbolically conforms to this truth. When Paulina was being tortured and raped, she was entirely blindfolded and thereby was denied having any access to the knowledge and identity of her torturer. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault discusses in great detail the nature of Bentham’s
“panopticon” (200), saying that through this architectural composition the modern hegemonic power has full access to the knowledge of its subjects and monitors them but the subjects remain blindfolded, that is, they do not have access to either the knowledge of the power-structure or the discourses ruling and subjugating them. Although in this play Paulina has been associated with darkness and “unreason,” she articulates the most powerful discourse in this scene. Thereby the text significantly inverts and problematizes the traditional dichotomies of Man/Woman, Reason/Madness, Speech/Silence, Truth/Lies that the doctor’s discourse evokes. Paulina’s scatological remarks, her sexually bold postures, sexual innuendoes and strong expletives, which her husband feels should apologize for to Dr Miranda (26), are the effects of her empowered position. Unable to disempower his opponent, Dr Miranda changes his discursive strategy and henceforth a new discourse begins to gather shape-humanitarian reasons are first invoked and states the need for helping the person being tortured. Gerardo as a representative of the state-law and justice-system tries to mediate between the two conflicting discourses but in doing so inevitably conforms to Paulina’s “madness” (18), making a humanitarian appeal in favour of the former male torturer, so that the cycle of violence can be stopped. Here is established the typical male bonding in a conventional patriarchal society which attempts to marginalize the females by branding them either as “mad,” or “utterly unpredictable” (10). But since Paulina insists upon Dr Miranda’s confession and threatens that only “the truth” can save him now, Dr Miranda cannot but indulge in “the mad woman’s” whims and following his mediator Gerardo’s advice reluctantly agrees to make a fake confession. Now the former torturer’s voice emerges and the coercive possibilities of what Foucault describes as the “mechanics of power” (1977, 138) are revealed as the torturer tends to gloat over his absolute power exerted with total impunity. In Miranda’s depiction of the torture inflicted upon Paulina the reader/audience experiences the violence meted out to her body and can see how like a commodity she was exchanged and passed down through the hands of her male torturers. The issue, albeit not developed further in the text, informs us that the soldiers tortured and raped Paulina and then offered her to the doctor as a sexual gift (42). Thus the woman becomes a commodity in a male relationship instead of a partner in the transaction.

However, it is clear that the play has a difficult time setting-it is the transition to democracy from dictatorship and although the place is Chile, Latin America, the dramatist gives the hint that it could be anywhere else in the world and could be any country undergoing such transition of politics and social structure, lending the universal quality of the play. But the question inevitably comes into our mind that what happens when a new and tenuous democracy, of political necessity, turns its back on some of the victims of the regime it has replaced or fails to give them justice and take retribution in their behave. Paulina is just such a victim and the play provides ample evidence of that. Her already fragile emotional state is thrown into turmoil by her husband’s appointment to the president’s commission charged with investigating the crimes of the past regime-but only those crimes that resulted in death or the presumption of death. Her kidnapping and torture will not be investigated because these are not considered as the “most serious” crimes committed during the dictatorship and for all official purpose her pain and humiliation have little value. Moreover, the kind of evidence she provides for her allegation upon her torturer-her identification of the smell, touch, and voice of her torturer, and the habit of his quoting or rather misquoting of Nietzsche, and the piano sonata he was used to hear during the torture session-will not be taken into account by the state-law because in all these cases she lacks an eye-witness as she was blindfolded during the torture. Therefore, her silence must continue and the new government in whose cause she refused to give over names including Gerardo’s, her then boyfriend and fellow dissent will not take retribution for her. Hence confronting the failure of legal retribution, Paulina decides to take personal revenge-after the men have gone to sleep she picks up Gerardo’s gun and ties the doctor up to a chair and gags him and then hides his car in which she finds a cassette recording of Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden”- the very music that her torturer used to play repeatedly as he raped her. After Gerardo awakens he is naturally shocked at what Paulina has done and tries to explain the practicalities to her that “If he’s guilty, more reason to set him free” (27) and further tries to make her understand that if people in this country try to satisfy their personal passion and take personal revenge by punishing on their own, then the country’s whole transition to democracy will be an utter failure. So he urges Paulina to “Let him go . . . for the good of the country . . .” (27). Dr Miranda also, in his own self-interest, presents a compelling argument against any such personal action: “So someone did terrible things to you and now you’re doing something terrible to me and tomorrow somebody else is going to-on and on and on . . . isn’t it time we stopped” (46). Gerardo and Dr Miranda’s arguments are right of course-the violence Paulina contemplates towards Dr Miranda both mirrors and perpetuates the horrors committed
against her and she remains ensnared in a cycle of violence that might have no end, hindering the country’s progress in a spirit of reconciliation. But Paulina’s needs are personal and not political and the state cannot totally ignore the personal needs of the citizens. Therefore, Paulina raises the vital question “And me? What I need?” (27). She seeks, as most victims do, a rebalancing. Her torture has grabbed something from her which she wants to get back. In a word, she wants a retribution. The word ‘retribution’ has its root in the Latin word ‘retribuere’ (re + tribuere), meaning “to give back.” Adequate retribution for Paulina will pay back to her the vital thing she lost as a result of the crime done to her. But if the state fails in its responsibility to exact retribution for her she will take revenge into her own hands. When a new government turns its back on the victim or ignores their demands and needs, the victims will in time take things in their hand and will become the perpetrators in the next stage of the cycle of revenge that has no appropriate end. If a state expects people like Paulina to be the ones who should only make the concessions, then it neglects critical truths about human history and psychology. Hence Paulina’s painful urge in this play “why is it always people like me who have to sacrifice . . . who have to make concessions when something has to be conceded, biting my tongue, why?” (46).

History shows us that revenge cycle ends, when the victims cede the right to take revenge to the state and when the state properly fulfils that duty. In that case, the victims are somehow satisfied that they have retrieved something they have lost. Although what they get back, of course, can in no way be commensurable with what they lost due to the harm but is nonetheless satisfying to them to some extent. If we look back we can see how revenge was once at the heart of the idea of justice and the taking away of revenge was acknowledged and served the basis for state-sponsored judgment and punishment. But the human need for revenge continued to be acknowledged and served the basis for state-sponsored judgment and punishment. Thus revenge and justice continued to be aligned. But the giving over was tentative and reluctant and was frequently taken back by the individual or family especially in those cases when the state failed to take the retribution. Hence the state must do something in response to the wrongs against its citizens, instead of accusing the citizens (as Gerardo here does to Paulina) when they are compelled to take personal revenge.

From the outset of the play it is clear that Paulina is a victim and is a victim many times over. The crime perpetrated against her is textually implicit-she was raped and tortured (electric currents were passed through her vagina) fifteen years earlier for refusing to reveal information about Gerardo, her then boyfriend and fellow dissident but this crime has never been acknowledged. Thus Paulina has suffered consequences of the politically enforced silence. Her ability to articulate her pain was already snatched away by her torturer through the state-sponsored violence upon her and further the state-enforced silence has undoubtedly exacerbated her psychological damage. What Paulina actually lost was ‘language’ and the brutal experience she has repressed throughout her life has become a traumatic nightmare for her and has destabilized her ‘self’ and the adequate rebalancing, she might achieve, requires the restitution of that lost language. Hence Paulina urges to Gerardo “. . . let me have my say” (26) and lays out her emotional status to him, saying “. . . the only thing I really want? . . . I want him to confess . . . not just to me, everything, to everybody . . . ” (29). It is surprising that words are what Paulina needs-she wanted Miranda’s confession and wanted the story of what happened to her to be heard and acknowledged, analyzing the relationship between language and trauma, the next topic of discussion in this paper.

3. The Expression of Traumatic Nightmare, its Exorcism and the Construction of the Self

The characters in this play engage in a specific kind of communicative event called the confession, which is essentially a narrative mode in which one person recounts or unburdens to another aspects of his or her past, which involve some wrongdoing. There are two sides of confession-one is the confessant who confesses and the other is the confessor who hears the confession. In this process the confessor and the confessant enter into a dialectical relation.

However, one important aspect regarding the confession in Death and the Maiden is that Paulina here forces Dr Miranda to tell his story or the account of his torture upon Paulina, instead of herself telling her story and thereby unburdening herself. Actually in forcing Miranda to confess, she has a chance not only to tell her own story but also to hear the “other” of her story, meaning to hear “his side” of the story, so that she can complete the picture. This corresponds to Bakhtin’s notion of self and other, suggesting that we need the other as narrative response in order to complete ourselves.
Bakhtin suggests that “pure, solitary self-accounting is impossible” (Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* 144). Paulina forces Miranda to go through the process because she desperately needs to experience and cannot undergo it by herself. That is why Paulina needs Dr Miranda as he also needs her in order to “fill in” the respective images of both selves. Bakhtin refers to this process as the “excess of seeing” which reflects the axiologically situated place of the other. Regarding this he says:

The excess of my seeing must ‘fill in’ the horizon of the other human being who is being contemplated, must render his horizon complete, without at the same time forfeiting his distinctiveness. I must emphasize or project myself into this other human being, see his world axiologically from within him as he sees this world; I must put myself in his place and then, after returning to my own place, ‘fill in’ his horizon through that excess of seeing which opens out from this, my own place outside him. (25)

Paulina’s statement before her husband contains “small lies, small variations” (45) which she later confesses that she had inserted to see whether Roberto would correct them or not. Indeed Roberto did this and these corrections verify for her the truth of his confession and his identity as her torturer. Paulina realizes that the redemption of her past depends on Dr Miranda’s confession to his crimes. Although her husband Gerardo urges her to forget her past memory, she declares her refusal to forget the past outright. Her fear-charged statement right after this “And let him loose so he can come back in a few years’ time?” (27), and Gerardo’s statement before it “you’re still a prisoner, you stayed there behind with him, locked in that basement” (27) reveal the structure of trauma. As Cathy Caruth points out lodged in the timeless expanse of the unconscious traumatic experience tends to repeatedly reemerge against the victim’s conscious will and haunts the individual beyond the original event that gave rise to it in the past (Caruth 4). Moreover, trauma’s truth is bound with a crisis of truth and the victim feels too close to the event to perceive it as real (Introduction 8). In this play Paulina dwells in the impossibility of knowing as described by Caruth. In order to overcome her trauma, she must translate her suffering into words and reinsert it into a cohesive narrative. Again breaking the ties connecting her to her memories is not only impossible but also would amount to the loss of her identity. In Tony Morrison’s *Beloved*, the protagonist Sethe and other people of their community, in spite of their repeated efforts to get rid of Beloved’s ghost, are haunted by it because the ghost symbolizes the traumatic memory of rape and torture that they underwent under the institution of slavery. The ghost becomes a part of their identity without which their existence becomes at stake and the proper method of ‘exorcism’ lies not in repression of the memories of those horrible experiences in the “tobacco tin heart” but in the spontaneous articulation of the stories of those experiences and listening to them. Hence Beloved’s ghost forces Sethe and Paul D to articulate their repressed traumatic memories. However, the piano sonata of Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” also plays an ambiguous role in understanding the traumatic event in Paulina’s life. Just as the devastated maiden in this piano sonata is led by the ambiguously comforting and ominous voice of Death, for Paulina the Schubert represents the values of a civilized society and the nobility of spirit that vanished during the years of oppression and torture and turned into a raw devastation and annihilation. But like the civilized society itself, it must be recovered or to “bring him back from the grave” (17).

However, we now shift our focus upon the nature of torturer and evil done towards humanity and in this regard reference to Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* is important. Taking Eichmann as an example, Arendt discusses evil as banal evil but is not to be misunderstood in the sense that she is essentializing evil as banal or trying to trivialize evil. Rather she argues against the mythologization of evil and thereby disassociating it from humanity. Instead of a monster intent on inflicting harm, Arendt found in Eichmann an efficient bureaucrat whose thoughtlessness and lack of conscience enabled him to do evil in the guise of doing his job or duty-following his superiors’ orders and sending thousands to their deaths (54). Likewise Dr Miranda, the torturer in this play is basically a good human being and a good doctor. As we see at the beginning of the play that he helped Gerardo reach his home from midway at night by giving him a lift after Gerardo had a flat tire of his car. Later we came to know from his confession that he lied to his authority in order to save the lives of the prisoners and used Schubert’s “Death and the maiden” not only to show his upright status but also to alleviate the suffering of the victims. But gradually he got absorbed into the mechanics of torture by banishing his thoughtfulness and conscience and turned into a ruthless torturer. He confesses:

It was slowly, almost without realizing how, that I became involved in more delicate operations . . . my role was to determine if the prisoners could take that
much torture . . . many times . . . without it being true . . . I ordered them to stop or the prisoners would die . . . but afterwards . . . the mask of virtue fell off . . . A kind of brutalization took over my life. (41)

4. Conclusion

However, like the protagonists in Dorfman’s play the Chilean government will have to walk a thin line between the erasure of a repressed memory that will perpetually struggle to resurface, and the drowning of the present in the shadows of a troubled history. Gerardo’s position confirms an in-between space. His self is constructed by law like the judge Dansforth in Miller’s The Crucible. He is himself a lawyer and also embodies law in this play and finds himself torn between justice’s claim of universality and the particular demands of Paulina and Dr Miranda. Thereby he realizes the impossibility of coming to a conclusion that would appease both the contenders. The open-endedness of the text suggests that neither its principal characters nor the Chilean society as a whole will be able to find a fully satisfactory solution to their dilemma. By using a defamiliarising technique—the descent of a giant mirror—the text gives the spectator/reader the necessary distancing irony that will prevent them from emotionally and uncritically identifying with any particular discourse in the play. Even Paulina’s account of her torture inflicted upon her is not presented onstage. So the giant mirror, which descends in front of the stage when Paulina is about to decide whether to kill or to spare the person she believes to be her torturer, passes the choice on to the spectators who are forced to look at their own reflection on the mirror-curtain and are thereby summoned to participate in the trial of Dr Miranda and to reach their own verdicts which ought to be variable and distinct. Thus in keeping with the typical postmodernist Foucauldian stance, the text rejects any agreement or fixed solution or any universal truth but problematizes the issue of state-sponsored justice. This pluralistic strategy may also establish that there are no totalizing or universal truths but are only situated responses to particular social, historical and ideological contexts.

5. References


