

# ‘The good,’ ‘the bad,’ and ‘the evil’ in the socialist novel: A case study of two Bulgarian novels

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## *Abstract*

*This paper argues that during a period of severe ideological repression in Bulgaria, namely the Stalinisation between 1948 and 1953, two novels were published that to a great extent successfully overturned totalitarian normative narratives. I claim that their success was due to the fact the authors depicted their characters on two levels. On the one hand, there was clear unity with the officialdom and its Marxist-Leninist proclamations, on the other hand, the authors expressed an open disunity with the regime by separating their characters from the norms of political reality. On this basis I present my main argument: that the authors of these novels, by effacing the differences between ‘the good,’ ‘the bad,’ and ‘the evil,’ actually redefined communist principles concerning the role of the individual within the political realm. I use an interdisciplinary methodology that consists of historical and literary analysis and aims to bring together the communist regime’s ideological construction of the role of the individual with the positioning of the characters from these novels.*

Keywords: Characterisation, Political reality, Individual, Escapism, Stalinism

The following paper is based on a presentation given during the Unity/Disunity conference which took place in June 2013 at UCL. Some of the conclusions in the paper are influenced by questions raised during the conference. The aim of this paper is to introduce literary characterisation as a mechanism for disunification

in the Bulgarian novel, separating it from the official ideology of the Bulgarian totalitarian regime. As a case study I take two Bulgarian novels, Emilian Stanev's, *Крадецът на праскови* [*Kradecut na Praskovy* Eng. *The Peach Thief*] (1949/2004; Eng. trans. *The Peach Thief and Other Stories*, 1968) and Dimitar Dimov's Тютюн [*Tyutun* Eng. *Tobacco*] (1951/2001<sup>1</sup>), both written in the Stalinist period, a period is known for its severe censorship and harsh political repression. These literary works, although written in conformity with the norms of socialist realism, represented an alternative to the predominant socialist discourse in socialist cultural life. In order to reveal the relationship between unity and disunity in these novels, I am informed by Stuart Hall's theory of representation (Hall, 1997) and by the ideas about the relations between power and discourse presented by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1972). The main objective of the paper is to present a detailed analysis of the role of the individual both in terms of political doctrine and literary representation.

I argue that notwithstanding the quality of these novels and the talent of its authors, what turns them into masterpieces is their presentation of an alternative to the standard socialist depiction of the characters. I claim that the process of unification/disunification between the characters and political reality results in a model of characterisation where the individual character overlaps the division between good and bad. Moreover, I argue that these novels produce three types of characters – the good, the bad and the evil.

### **Individual and reality – political and cultural aspects**

The two novels in question were both published during the Stalinist period (1948–1953). During this time the Bulgarian Communist Party, BCP, and its leader Vulko Chervenkov created a regime characterised by the widespread usage of mass repression against both external and internal enemies (Crampton, 1997). Simultaneously, the people in power worked on an ideological goal of creating the 'new socialist man'. Firstly, this persona had to dissolve his or her personality into the mass collective – a process described by Hannah Arendt in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1962). Secondly, the model citizen of socialist Bulgaria had to be an embodiment of the victory of the working class and in a position of persistent vigilance against any attempts to revive old political models. Lastly, in relation to domestic and international politics, the model communist habitant had to demonstrate both undoubted loyalty towards the BCP and obedience towards the Soviet Union.

The communist regime needed to present the masses with adequate representations of these new moral principles. As a result, Bulgarian writers embarked on the mission, set out explicitly twenty years earlier by Stalin, of becoming 'engineers of the human soul'. Consequently, Bulgarian socialist literature came to use certain familiar prototypes – such as fabric workers eager to achieve the five-year plan, progressive peasants who admire collectivisation, and emancipated women leaving the burdens of the old pre-communist model of family relations behind.

In order to be properly represented these new heroes needed to be confronted by an antithesis to their ideals. Amongst the prototypical culprits were

property owners and bankers, clerks, rich peasants, middle class housewives, etc. In this way the conflicts in the early socialist novel performed the political task of reigniting the struggle between socialism and capitalism. In addition, the literary works enforced the struggle by using the Marxist discourse of the confrontation between revolutionary consciousness and leanings towards passive and static existence.

The outcome, however, was not as successful as expected by the new regime. The commissioned literary works were unloved by readers and official critics. On a number of meetings between writers and party officials, the latter repeatedly argued about the lack of influential literature. It was in this period of deep cultural stagnation that Emilian Stanev published his novel *The Peach Thief* (1949) followed by the appearance of Dimitar Dimov's saga *Tobacco* (1951) two years later.

### Authors and plot

Dimov and Stanev both belong to the pre-war cultural milieu. They exemplify the second generation of intellectuals in the history of the modern Bulgarian state (founded in 1878). Graduates of the State University, they were influenced by the ideas of European political and philosophical thought. In *The Peach Thief*, Stanev combined his openly Biblical depictions with modernist visions about the role of being. On its part, *Tobacco* bears witness to Dimov's vision about the human condition, influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and Octave Mirbeau.

*The Peach Thief* is a novel close to the genre of war drama. Its plot unfolds during the last days of the First World War. The main character, Ivo, is a prisoner of war who during one of his habitual sneak-outs meets and falls for the wife of the town's provost, Elisaveta. The novel focuses on the short and tragic relationship between Ivo and Elisaveta. The novel also reveals stereotypes typical of provincial life during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

*Tobacco* is a more politically oriented novel. It is set in the late 1930s and develops around the tobacco company 'Nikotiana' and its ruthless director Boris Morev. The first layer of the novel focuses on the conflict between owners and workers, coinciding with the rise of the guerrilla movement and the last days of the Second World War. Beneath this class struggle a second plot layer can be found, in which the reader witnesses the development of the relationship between Boris and a young medicine student, Irina.

### The Good

The depiction of 'the good character' represented a challenge to the authors. The lack of novelistic success mentioned above was partially due to the scholastic and unattractive images of the positive hero. The two cases will reveal the success and failure in creating both good and trustworthy characters.

As previously stated, the good character in Stalinist literature represented the set of social values typical of the 'new socialist man'. Since the novel is set in the last days of the First World War – a period in which the communist movement in Bulgaria was still developing – the author of the *The Peach Thief* was partially exempt from the obligation to base the novel's characters on communist role models. However, Stanev did unify his novel with political discourses, but ones based on the Marxist visions of the period of the First World War. In that respect, the novel re-established the communist view which blamed the initiation of the war on Western capitalist forces and therefore showed the latter as the main culprits in destroying the life of many innocent people. One of these victims is the main character in *The Peach Thief*, Ivo – a Serbian school teacher transformed into a war prisoner. Since the initial unification around the main postulates of the communist regime was already present in the work, the author was in the position to disassociate his character from the governing ideological reality and set him in a non-political sphere of interpersonal relations. The actual disunification develops when Ivo meets Elisaveta, the town provost's wife. As a result of the love affair, Ivo risks his life for a personal cause, rather than for a collective one. Also, from being a mere victim of 'Big History', Ivo becomes the organiser of his own 'Micro History'. The revelation of his personal values and the main characterisation take place in the confines of his relationship with Elisaveta. Moreover, the Serbian prisoner of war draws the socialist reader into an adventure beyond the realms of the usual propaganda, where the 'the good' personality is based on participation in the destruction of the remnants of the bourgeoisie. The tragic end of Ivo, however, proves the impossibility of individual drive, when it is not directed at higher goals.

*Pavel*

In *Tobacco* the development of the plot (late 1930s and early 1940s) coincides with the activities of the communist guerrilla movement. This leads the author to depict his characters in typical communist fashion. Amongst the number of minor heroes of the communist resistance, the good leader takes the form of Pavel. His image is dogmatic and ideologically sated. Even his relationship with his brother Boris Morev (the capitalist and evil character in the novel) remains strictly confined to the realms of ideological confrontation. Moreover, at the end of the novel Pavel accepts the news of his brother's death without personal regrets and only as a confirmation of historical determinism. Similarly, he views female attention as a distraction. Even during an erotically charged scene, when Irina (already married to his brother) tries to seduce him, he resists the temptation on the basis of his ideological purity. Therefore, the character of Pavel is as unified with the communist doctrine as any in the novels from this period and he was quickly submitted to ideological evaluations. Indeed, due to its alleged lack of a proper and distinctive portrayal of the communist, *Tobacco* was banned soon after its publication.

The two cases represent an interesting contrast. The well organised and balanced conflict in *The Peach Thief* ensured that the work was accepted by the communist power wielders. On the other hand, the pathetic image of Pavel serves

to turn the focus of the reader towards the anti-hero characters that coexist with him in the novel. Important though the 'good characters' are in both novels, however, the nature of their conflicts develops to a great extent as a result of the inner dilemma of the 'bad character'.

## The Bad

'The bad' is a focal point of this paper, because it was 'the bad' characters that brought much of the interest and fame to these novels. Their depiction resulted in the creation of well-nuanced and balanced characters, outside of the political confines of the struggle between 'the good communist' and 'the evil oppressor'. Importantly, in both novels these characters are female. In socialist terms, women belonged, on the one hand, to a political class subjugated on the basis of gender, but on the other hand, and more predominantly, they belonged to a social class. In this respect, the communist discourse denigrated those women who belonged to middle-class families and consequently condemned them in the same manner as their husbands.

### *Elisaveta*

At the beginning of *The Peach Thief*, Elisaveta fits into this group of middle-class women. Her image is unified with the communist ethos – her everyday activity consists of caring for her sick husband, playing cards with him and occasionally glancing at the family's beautiful garden. More importantly, she has accepted her faith and enjoys the security provided by her class status. The meeting with Ivo, however, breaks the mould. In the eyes of the reader, Elisaveta is converted into a rebel, but not through political activity or confrontation with the order of the day, but by starting a love affair with the prisoner of war. The morality of her act is never questioned by the author. On the contrary, her awakened activities are the antithesis of her long absence from 'real' life. Her image evolves and she starts to question the foundations of her sheltered lifestyle – the people, her husband and the war itself. Eventually, Elisaveta goes too far in her attempts to rekindle her life and the outcome is tragic - she commits suicide, just minutes after Ivo is killed. This indicates author's severe judgment of the impossibility of rewriting your life, which corresponds to the historical determinism heralded by communist apologetics.

### *Irina*

Irina, the heroine from *Tobacco*, is also characterised by middle-class features. Instead of engaging with political and social activities, she studies Latin, reads Western philosophers and is absorbed by her desire to study medicine. The unification with the communist discourse is manifest in her social disengagement and egocentrism. Her personal life is marked by a number of immoral acts – before the death of Boris's wife, Irina was his mistress. Afterwards, when they are actually married, she voluntarily agrees to serve as a courtesan to his Nazi

business associates. However, in the midst of her personal moral decay the author depicts the character of Irina as profoundly alienated. Her personal decay is encompassed by deepening apathy towards both the surrounding world and her own life. Even the historical events relating to the collapse of Germany and the last days of the war do not shake her. The denial of reality becomes Irina's credo and self-destruction her motivation. Her entire characterisation appears to reflect the abovementioned philosophical influences of the author.

Importantly, the deaths of both heroines remain undepicted. Again it seems as if the omnipresence of historical determinism in the literature of the early 1950s precludes the notion of living happily to be represented as a possible model of existence. However, these two depictions of women aiming at individual happiness sharply contrast with the paradigm of 'the collective' in which the socialist woman was encapsulated.

### The Evil

The depiction of evil characters was a difficult task for the socialist writer. In that respect *The Peach Thief* and *Tobacco* made an important contribution to the model used to depict 'the evil'. Yet again, it is the interplay between unity and disunity with official dogma which engages our interest in the characters.

In *The Peach Thief*, the Elisaveta's husband exemplifies the archetype of the evil character. His image is that of a vicious class enemy, ex-military nationalist and town provost marshal.<sup>2</sup> In addition, he represents the middle-class man who oppresses his wife and is openly hostile towards any modernisation. On the other hand, Stanev disunifies his protagonist from official doctrine by revealing a completely opposite picture. The provost marshal turns out to be a wounded and lonely soldier whose only company was his wife Elisaveta. He is also a law-abiding citizen who openly demonstrates his disdain towards the moral decay of the period. Even his killing of Ivo is represented as an act of manslaughter rather than a jealous and vicious act. Moreover, after Elisaveta's suicide, the town provost remains shut in his house and dies shortly afterwards. Overall, his image and that of his wife are revealed in a way that tells both sides of the story.

In *Tobacco*, the character representing 'the evil' is Boris, Irina's husband. He is the owner of a tobacco company – completely ruthless towards the workers and engaged into a number of immoral endeavours such as selling tobacco to Nazi Germany. This image of an oppressor and collaborationist is vivid enough to unify Boris with the group denoted by the communist regime as 'enemies of the people' – most of whom were either shot or sent to concentrations camps. However, Dimov counteracted the dogmatic image with an in-depth analysis of the evilness inherent in the human character. During the majority of the novel, Boris's actions are presented through his interaction with the outside world and through detailed depictions of his physical decay. Dimov pushes aside moral judgment and lets the reader witness the impossibility of a man to come to terms with the evil within himself and, at the same time, to sustain his mental and psychological health. The outcome is the death of Boris, at the very time when his business ambitions seem to be fulfilled. As a whole, his image resembles Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov more than it does a vicious class enemy.

Historical determinism is of course an important factor here, since both the provost marshal and Boris represent the worst forms of oppression. However, instead of implementing the discourse of the prosecutor's speech or the judgmental remarks of a communist apologetic when depicting evil characters, both Stanev and Dimov focus on the individual experience of human helplessness. Only a few years after the end of the Second World War, and in the midst of another wave of human aggression, Stanev and Dimov were able to disunify political caricatures of evil and look beyond – into the psychology of the human condition.

## Conclusion

The relation between the individual and history is fundamental to the understanding of these novels. During the Stalinist period, survival of the individual was a central topic. It is not strange, therefore, that Stanev and Dimov tackle the idea of disunification between individual and social reality in dialectical terms. On the one hand, the tragic destiny of the characters reveals the predestined nature of this disunification. In the 1950s escapism was equal to anti-state activity and the only safe course was unification with socialist dogma – possible only through the connection between the individual and the BCP. On the other hand, the characters in these novels reveal the nuances in human activity. As a result, the reader gets to glimpse spaces in which the individual can make well-measured moves in the direction of disunification from official doctrine without, however, ever reaching complete dissociation from socialist dogma.

## Endnotes

- 1 In my work I focus on the original text of the novel, written before the author was forced to rewrite it. This version was published for the first time in 2001 as *Tyutun* (Sofia: Ciela 2001). There is no English translation to date.
- 2 Town provost marshals were usually responsible for dealing with the local communist resistance and therefore they were portrayed extremely negatively by the post-1948 regime.

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### **Biography**

Metodi Metodiev was born in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1981. He has a BA in History from Sofia University and an MA in Comparative History from the Central European University. Currently, he is in his second year of a PhD degree in the Czech Department of the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Glasgow University. He works under the supervision of Dr Jan Čulik and his topic is a comparative analysis of Bulgarian and Czechoslovakian literature of the 1950s and 1960s. Besides, he has also worked as professional translator and historical consultant for documentary movies.