

## The Political Abyss: A Socio-Political Study of Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*

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### Abstract:

Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* is a novel produced at the beginning of World War II. In this novel, strict and one-sided approach to ideology results in diving into the abyss. This issue is studied in the novel focusing on the main character from a sociopolitical perspective. The paper sheds light on Nicolas Rubashov's demagogic involvement in the party's strict ideology. Also, it examines how his sense of identity is shaken and he wakes up to the reality. Besides, Rubashov's imprisonment is analyzed through the lens of Foucault's theory of Panopticism.

### المخلص:

ظلام عند الظهيرة لأرثر كوستلر هي رواية أنتجت في بداية الحرب العالمية الثانية. في هذه الرواية، نهج الصارم والأحادي الجانب للايديولوجيا يؤدي إلى الغوص في الهاوية. هذه المسألة هي موضوع الدراسة مع التركيز على الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية من منظور اجتماعي وسياسي. الدراسة تلقي أيضا الضوء على مشاركة نيكولا روباشوف في الديماغوغية في أيديولوجيا الحزب الصارمة. كما تبحث كيف اهتزت إحساسه بالهوية وأنه يستيقظ على الواقع. إلى جانب ذلك، يتم تحليل سجنه من خلال نظرية بانوبتيسيزم لفوكو.

### پوخته

تاریکای له نیومرۆدا، رۆمانیکی ئارسەر کویتسلەر که له سەرمتای دووهم جەنگی جیهانی بەرھەم ھێنراوە. لەم رۆمانەدا، ئاراستەگیرییەکە بەرتەنگ و یەک لایەنە بۆ نایدۆلۆژیا سەر دەکێشێت بۆ خۆ ھەڵدان بۆ ناو چالێکی بێ بن. ئەم پرسە، بە سەرئێخستنه سەر کارمکتەر سەرھەکییەکە لە روانگەی کۆمەلایەتیی سیاسییەو تەووتۆی دەکێت. ھەرۆھا توێژینەوێکە، رۆشنایی دەخاتە سەر بەشداری دیماکۆگیانە نیکۆلاس روباشوف لە نایدۆلۆژیا بەرتەسکی حزیدا و ھەستی شوناس و بێداربوونەوێ بەرەمبەر واقع. وێرای ئەمەش، زیندانیکردنی روباشوف لە سۆنگەی تیۆری پانوپتیسیزمی فوکووە شێدەکێتەو.

**Introduction:**

Socio political studies are usually conducted within a set of terminology that are essentially required for better analysis of literary texts. As the title of this paper is concerned with the socio-political dimensions of this political novel, it is found necessary to focus on certain related concepts that deal with the novel's atmosphere and engage the main character. Nicholas Rubashov starts with demagoguery to play his role as a struggling politician for supposedly ideal causes. Later he disillusions towards the reality and falls into the party's trap. Then, the party's panoptical apparatus brings him under further surveillance in the prison to control and ridicule him before liquidate him under false accusations.

**1-The Duty of Demagogue: Spreading the Evil Truth:**

According to the Dictionary of Politics and Government, "demagogue is a leader who is able to get the support of the people by exciting their feelings". Hence, demagoguery is "the activity of appealing to feelings such as fear, greed or hatred of the mass of the people" (Homes 67). Thus, what the demagogue tries to convey is not necessarily the truth, but what can influence feelings of the people as far as possible for the sake of their consent. Sometimes it becomes the way an evil version of truth is spread.

Historically, demagoguery was not limited to Stalin's communism. Indeed, both the Bolsheviks and their opponents did not shrink from demagoguery. Even the Bolshevik appeal succeeded because there was an eager audience for their radical position (Kenez 26). Actually, Lenin's fight at the turn of the century for small centralized elite with demagogical leadership, laid the foundations for the rise of a disciplined totalitarian party (Neumann 491).

Through demagoguery, the modern dictatorship takes the position of religion for people who have lost their faith in a transcendental power. It ministers to the human yearning for worship. This explains the subsequent and violent conflict of a totalitarian state with religious authorities. Such a revival of the divine right assumption serves as a useful means for shifting the final responsibility to an agency deprived of efficient way of control and coercion. It strengthens a dictatorship which transcends human power to contest, thus removing it from the domain of human criticism. In this regard "The most powerful modern demagogues are sincere and fanatic believers in their mission as "saviors" of their people...The real demagogue gives them faith and security because he is so sure of himself" (487).

The irrational appeal observed in the principle of demagogic propaganda is embodied in a psychological situation. Modern demagogues pay special attention to building up a whole technique of this kind. What is surprising is the open frankness with which they advise their followers. They even allow the masses to look behind the curtain of demagogic domination. This does not weaken its effectiveness. "By revealing the secrets of their system, they make its victims share in it and make them admire the efficiency of their methods" (495).

Demagogic propaganda makes good use of the new psychological trends. Moreover, it requires revolutionary changes of mind. The printed word can be dangerous to demagogic rule. It can be thought over when left alone. It can be criticized. It can even testify against its creator. It leaves an uncontrolled reaction with its reader. On the other hand, the spoken word in public, wisely directed, leaves a lasting impression. Consequently, the demagogue does not acknowledge controversial attitudes. He declares his opponent a liar, a traitor to the only truth. The party line obtains a sort of

mystic holiness. Totalitarian regimes and their leaders are infallible. To question their policies is sin (497).

In his prison diaries Rubashov writes: "...The ultimate truth is penultimately always a falsehood. He who will be proved right in the end appears to be wrong and harmful before it" (Koestler 97). This confession by Rubashov reveals his wrong approach to the harmful version of truth which was promoted by the party and to which he contributed as a leader.

In *Darkness at Noon*, Rubashov recalls a memory from previous years, when he was a diplomat in Germany propagating the Party message abroad. He had an appointment with a regional leader of the Party named Richard. They would meet at a picture gallery, and while keeping himself focused on a Pietà painting of the Virgin Mary, Rubashov told Richard that it was a mistake for him to have printed his own pamphlets for the political cause rather than using the official Party message. Richard had felt like he could adjust the Party message to recruit new people in the best way possible. Rubashov thought that the Party, as the representative of the revolutionary idea in history, could never be mistaken and its message should not be modified. This mentality confirms the validity of the party's ideology and course of action at whatever cost possible. Here, Rubashov behaves as an obstinate politician who expects detailed and total obedience of members of lower ranks.

Demagoguery in politics aims at making sure that the message and the program of the party run smoothly. Thus the demagogue is a person who possesses at least three characteristics: "he is motivated by self-interest, he evinces little concern for the truth, and he is an opportunist" (Gustainis 156). These characteristics apply to Rubashov's personality as he believes that what is commanded is more important than what should be done and he does not seem to care about others as far as there is always an opportunity to ascend the political ladder of the party.

When Richard presents his report to Rubashov as the party's Central Committee comrade, the latter rebukes him as being indifferent and not following the minute detail of the party's guidance as well as violating the strict rules. Rubashov states that several things are not clear in Richard's report, since he speaks frequently of the leaflets and pamphlets which he himself wrote. Besides, there are several phrases which the Party cannot accept (Koestler 38).

To Rubashov, the only truth that exists is the one which has been set in advance by the leadership and cannot be questioned. He is the leader who is expected to reveal what reflects the party and the leader not the members and their ideas. He was: "to be trusted like a father; but that one must not show this feeling nor betray any weakness. For he who was soft and sentimental was no good for the task and had to be pushed aside—pushed out of the movement, into solitude and the outer darkness" (37). This approach of the party leaders is too mechanical as if individual members are materials to be used wherever possible for the sake of the party's interests.

Rubashov thinks back to another situation, when he had to go to Belgium and explain to a group of people—including Little Loewy, an eager supporter of the Party who had jeopardized his life many times for the cause—that the Party was going to renege on its pledge to boycott fascist countries. Little Loewy refused to accept this because he regarded it to be a betrayal of the revolution ideals. When he realized that the Party would accept no deviation from its official policy, he hanged himself. Here again, Rubashov saw it fine for the party to renege on its principal pledges

like boycotting fascist countries. He even went so far as to deliver the message to the devoted people of the party. Rubashov starts reflecting about specific details from his time with Little Loewy and Richard, and he is disturbed by them. Back then Rubashov was obstinate and behaved like brainwashed politicians; a leader who had to speak rather than listen to others.

Beside Richard and Little Lowey, Arlova, Rubashov's secretary and mistress, is another victim of demagoguery and stubbornness. She is expelled from the party and is executed, all by orders from Rubashov, since she is allegedly working for opposition and has deviated from party rules. Rubashov does not have humane relations with those people whom he causes their death except for a robotic commanding to apply and spread what the party strictly believes in. Thus the demagogue is not a normal person; he "has no friends, no equals. He must abstain from the comfort of intimacy. He trusts nobody. He is lost to the world. That is the price he has to pay for being a superhuman leader. He is usually an unsociable individualist by nature. As the leader, he cultivates this aloofness as a weapon of defense" (Neumann 494). Rubashov as an arrogant politician is aloof from all the surroundings and, eventually, his isolation is emphasized by the fact that he does not find a single sympathetic face in the audience (Wetzel 25). The radical change he is going through inside the prison does not help him in changing the people's permanent attitude towards him outside.

Rubashov has always believed that he is right in whatever he is doing as a leader of the party. In his diaries on the fifth day of imprisonment, he admits that previously he has considered himself infallible: "The fact is: I no longer believe in my infallibility. That is why I am lost" (101). That quandary leads him to review his past in the darkness of prison and in his uncertain fate. Thus, he begins to awaken to his demagoguery of commanding the illusion of what was considered to be true with all its evilness.

## **2-An Ideal Cause, a Pragmatic Awakening**

From the flashbacks and the conversations between Rubashov and Ivanov, a full picture of Rubashov's beliefs in the early days of the Revolution and the Civil War is demonstrated. At that time, he shares the old mentality of his fellow revolutionaries, who justify their cruelty against the enemies of the revolution regardless of moral values and that the Communist utopia cannot be implemented without a temporary period of blood shedding and repressive control (Spariosu 129, 130). Accordingly, Rubashov along with his comrades share the same ideal cause of communist utopia to be reached through whichever way possible.

Eventually, it turned out that the movement had no hesitations; it moved towards its goal indifferently and removed the bodies of the drowned in the twists of its course. Its course had many windings and whosoever could not follow her curved course was washed on to the bank, since it was her law. The motives of the individual did not concern it; neither did it care what went on in his head and his heart. "The Party knew only one crime: to swerve from the course laid out; and only one punishment: death. Death was no mystery in the movement; there was nothing exalted about it: it was the logical solution to political divergences" (Koestler 76). Rubashov was considered as one of those who had deviated from the course and he had to pay for the alleged wrongdoing. Now in prison without knowing the clear reasons, he was increasingly facing a confusing state; a sort of identity crisis that was putting him in further uncertainty.

In order to describe Rubashov's identity crisis, three opposing forces can be identified that shape his inner transformation. The first is related to communist ideology, specifically the belief that individual suffering is justified if it is in the interest of the Party. This prioritizing of a 'we' contradicts with the second force, which is Rubashov's search for personal identity. This search prioritizes the 'I'. On the other hand, the third force that is the spiritual force opposes the first force. Though it seems that a mystic dissolution of the self contradicts the turn to the self, the two forces appear to be closely related (Zocco 142). As a result, there can be a self-review of a spiritual journey during his loneliness in prison that causes unsteady changes towards the ending.

These forces cause the protagonist's identity crisis. In prison, Rubashov contemplates on the relevance of communist ideology, individuality, and mysticism. He no longer believes in communism and attempts to create a new self-identity, yet at the end of the novel he discards these new thoughts and doubts. This indicates that the communist ideology eventually rules Rubashov's inner transformation; nevertheless, a closer examination of the story generates a more paradoxical reading. On the one hand, Rubashov finally sacrifices himself for a Party whose ideology he now rejects; and, on the other hand, he goes through a positive feeling of unity with it. This is something that he experiences just before his death and may point to a success in his search for personal identity or to his mystic solution of self that comes from a waking call for him. However, the prison and its surroundings imply that the "we" force is still in charge and continues erasing the self-exploring efforts.

In *Darkness at Noon*, prison is not just a place to become lost. A variety of people are thrown into the party's prison, mostly with false accusation of being opposition members or conspirators. For Rubashov, prison becomes a place for awakening to what was happening outside. He puts himself in the place of Ivanov, his first interrogator and former fellow leader. This process of seeing from others' eyes was the indicator of the self-righteousness he always believed in before. Now he should use others' eyes to see himself better and look for wrongdoings in him. Undergoing a process of sincere self-questioning as a result of being imprisoned by his supposedly fellow comrades, he disbelieves his own thought of the truth. What ultimately turns out here is that he had to be untrue to himself so that he could be successful in his career as a revolutionary, since humane truth often is not compatible with the dogmatic truth.

Rubashov's seeing from others' eyes results from the awareness that the other person is also a sensitive being to his emotions and his sufferings. This state is the reminder of how he looked at his fellows of lower rank, Richard and Little Lowey who were subject to his condemnation. It is important for Rubashov to find out that for a judgment to be valid, it should not be directed subjectively. His untimely awakening in prison helps him to notice the scattered truth except what is designated by the party through him as a leader.

Bogrov, one of Rubashov's faithful comrades and one of the revolutionary commanders, is also brought to execution. This weakens Rubashov as it reveals what turn the party has taken. Now that rationality has taken effect, it is clear that "The encounter with Bogrov's whimpering awakens Rubashov to the injustice of a rationality that pursues ends by any means necessary" (Berkowitz 300). The injustice of rationality does not show the pity to those who once made every effort for the party's favor. Believing in morality and decency for whatever a veteran leader has done, is a hard truth that calls Rubashov to contemplate about.

Bogrov was a sailor on the Battleship Potemkin and an original hero of the revolution. He maintained his idealistic belief in world revolution at a time when Stalin sought to consolidate power at home. Bogrov was in favor of large submarines which were useful for world revolution, while the party was in favor of small submarines which would further the goal of domestic security. Since the hero and commander Bogrov carried great personal authority, his unwillingness to admit his supposed error would cause confusion among the people and required his liquidation.

As Ivanov observes during an interrogation session, Rubashov's main problem is that he is beginning to develop a "conscience," and a conscience "renders one as unfit for the revolution as a double chin. Conscience eats through the brain like a cancer, until the whole of the grey matter is devoured" (Koestler 153). The greatest danger for a revolutionary, Ivanov adds, is to "regard the world as a sort of metaphysical brothel for emotions. That is the first commandment for us. Sympathy, conscience, disgust, despair, repentance and atonement are for us repellent debauchery" (155). According to Ivanov, Rubashov has brought misfortune upon himself through emotions that a communist leader or member should avoid otherwise grows unfit for the revolutionary journey with a possibility of paying a price.

For Ivanov, the solution in the case of Bogrov is clear and he tells Rubashov: "There was no other way possible than to liquidate him administratively. Would not you have done the same thing in our position?" (154). Indeed, throughout his career Rubashov has sacrificed good and devoted people to the needs of the Party. Back then, this was an indicator of that the individual suffering had no value for a political leader and decency had no moral importance. But, his comrades' prison awakens him to the fact that he also can be subjected to ideological miscalculations of the party.

### **3-The End Justified the Means**

During Gletkin's interrogation, Rubashov says that he acted neither out of a counter-revolutionary mentality, nor was he in the service of a foreign Power (239). Rubashov gives his defensive position the last chance, but of no avail. Feeling that he is approaching the abyss, he increasingly concedes.

At the beginnings of the novel, Koestler describes how Rubashov experiences the proximity of death shortly after being imprisoned:

So I shall be shot, thought Rubashov. Blinking, he watched the movement of his big toe, which stuck up vertically at the end of the bed. He felt warm, secure and very tired; he had no objection to dozing straight off into death, there and then, if only one let him remain lying under the warm blanket (12).

The state of Rubashov does not only imply a restful sleep after a tiresome period of life outside, but also an acceptance of the ultimate death that he might face unexpectedly just the way he was thrown into prison. Rubashov's disappointment of what he eventually faced and what he struggled for in the first place, made him view death as a complete material state. This was not something unfamiliar, for "The idea of death had a long time ago lost any metaphysical character; it had a warm, tempting, bodily meaning – that of sleep" (226).

According to Sparisou, one of Rubashov's mistakes was that for forty years he had fought against economic fatality as he thought it to be "the central ill of humanity, the cancer which was eating into its entrails". He had the mistaken belief that the only solution for that was "the surgeon's knife and his cool calculation". This belief would probably see the problems that supposedly had

been created by capitalism which in turn ought to be replaced by communism in any way possible. Another mistaken belief, related to the first one, was the notion that the end justifies the means. It was this guideline that “had killed the fraternity of the Revolution and made them all run amuck”. These false beliefs inevitably led to “the time of great darkness” in which he found himself as well (139).

In the face of the trial Rubashov makes an attempt to reveal that he is no longer astray and the proof for that is the end of the opposition of which he was allegedly a member. He declares to his judges: “I speak here for the last time in my life. The opposition is beaten and destroyed. If I ask myself to-day, ‘For what am I dying? I am confronted by absolute nothingness’ (Koestler 256).

Rubashov thinks that he can at least give some meaning to his life and death at the end because of his repentance: “There is nothing for which one could die, if one died without having repented and unreconciled with the Party and the Movement. Therefore, on the threshold of my last hour, I bend my knees to the country, to the masses and to the whole people” (Koestler 256).

During his years abroad, Rubashov himself has changed. Under the influence of exile, he has come to share the self-doubts of other Old Guard members who, while ruthless during the Revolution, have mellowed with age, favoring somehow more gentle methods of implementing their Communist Utopia. Like them, he is uneasy about No. 1’s grab for absolute power. He becomes even more disaffected when he has to explain the cynical, pragmatic policies of No.1 to his fellow communists in the West, or must hand the latter over to the authorities in Hitler’s Germany, as demanded by these policies (Spariosu 130). This leads to total disillusionment of the revolutionary members struggling after the communist ideal; something which would not match the pragmatic take of No.1 hidden from their naked eyes.

Flatly expressionless, emotionless, mechanical Gletkin replaced friendly Ivanov as Rubashov's interrogator. This implied a generation transition from those who were mostly ideal to those who are practical. Rubashov admits to the matter that he is an old Bolshevik whose time is past; he and fellow members of the old guard are “ripe for liquidation” (Koestler 22). The Gletkins do not understand Rubashov’s likes and there is no possibility of communication between the old generation and the new. Gletkin seeks a predetermined confession on Rubashov’s part at any cost, since his time is over and he no longer has a place within the different young generation of communists. When Rubashov finally succumbs to the demand for a confession, Gletkin tells him:

Your task is therefore to make the opposition contemptible; to make the masses understand that opposition is a crime and that the leaders of the opposition are criminals. That is the simple language which the masses understand. If you begin to talk of your complicated motives, you will only create confusion amongst them. (243).

Thus, Gletkin is serious about erasing the idea of opposition and rebellion in the head of Rubashov completely lest it should reach the wider people and yield an impact.

The confusion that Gletkin talks about is the Rubashov’s clarity among the masses which should be reversed before it spreads. Rubashov knows that the revolution has gone astray and is seeking an explanation for its failure. Nevertheless, he cannot rid himself of the life-time habit of

obedience to the Party, so that at last he reluctantly accepts Gletkin and the new order which he represents, without realizing the full implications of what he does (Geering 92).

Gletkin does not care about what Rubashov thinks or says as long as he can elicit a confession from him through which he becomes a triumphant interrogator. Then, he tells Rubashov "...You wanted to split the Party, although you must have known that a split in the Party meant civil war" (243).

Rubashov thinks that there are things which a young man like Gletkin does not understand as the older generation does; only the time is over now. Consequently, Rubashov signs the statement, in which he confesses having committed his crimes through counterrevolutionary motives and in the service of a foreign Power (245). Admitting that their time as the old generation is over, Rubashov finds himself in the abyss.

#### **4-Foucault's Panopticism in *Darkness at Noon*:**

In *Darkness at Noon* a big machine of surveillance and a system of control is at work in the society and particularly in the prison. This is the way by which the party can manage surviving against any possibility of objection and rebellion. No. 1's portrait alone hangs on the walls once adorned by photos of all the Old Guard leaders including Rubashov himself. Thus, Rubashov in his diaries writes: "We resembled the great Inquisitors in that we persecuted the seeds of evil not only in men's deeds, but in their thoughts. We admitted no private sphere, not even inside a man's skull" (100).

In a society where a totalitarian regime rules, the single authoritative party does not leave any possibility of conspiracy against it, either on the part of individuals or the community. There is no room for privacy, while the possible death of the party hides in the private sphere. This is the way the Panopticon functions; it makes power pervasive through which no one remains safe from the evil that sneaks into his/her thought and behavior.

The prison has two openings to the outside: First a window, which allows for looking down to the courtyard and watching other prisoners during their daily walks. Through the window, Rubashov can be the object of other people's observations and also the perceiving subject (Zocco 151). Hence, the image of the character attributed to him by others might correspond to the way the power desires to mould the prisoner as a criminal.

The other opening is the spy hole which is a way of looking out to the prisoner and being watched by the prison guards. Rubashov is aware that the prison warders use the spy hole for observation and, as result, he is easily exposed to the outside. This is the way through which a person even inside the prison is not secure due to the pervasiveness of power. Totalitarian society in its more extreme version tends to abolish the boundary between the public and the private; power, as it grows denser, requires the lives of citizens to be completely transparent. A citizen does not have the right to hide anything at all from the Party or the State.

Rubashov's prison has many panoptic elements the way Foucault argued that the structure of the Panopticon not only relates to the process of permanent standardization and homogenization, but also influences the prisoner's perception of the carceral institution. Rubashov notices the possibility of being watched through the opening of his cell and, as a result, his self-perception changes. His awareness of potential surveillance creates a self-perception filtered through the eyes of the warder as the representation of omnipresent power:

So that is the legendary Rubashov, thought Rubashov in the name of the officer with the expressionless eyes. Screams for his breakfast like a schoolboy and isn't even ashamed. Cell not cleaned up. Holes in his socks. Querulous intellectual. Conspired against law and order: whether for money or on principles makes no difference. We did not make the revolution for cranks. True, he helped to make it; at that time, he was a man; but now he is old and selfrighteous, ripe for liquidation (22).

From the words above, it becomes clear that Rubashov considers himself as an object ridiculed by the present revolutionaries who see themselves as real heirs of the system and find no need of the predecessors anymore. But this is all a potential reading of the eyes of who might watch through the spy hole every now and then. In this respect "The perpetual threat of the gaze causes the subjects to internalize the workings of its scopic power within themselves" (Shah 705). Accordingly, the Panopticon is the apparatus which makes the prisoner doubt his innocence through developing rambling thoughts about what he has done.

### **Conclusion:**

Nicholas Rubashov is one of the prominent leaders next to No.1; a respected man who is praised for his fearlessness in the field, given difficult and dangerous duties and even been tortured, proving his loyalty to the Party. Through demagoguery, he directs his fellow party members and imposes upon them its rules. He assumes a role which is very serious and demagogical. While there is supposedly an ideal cause for him to struggle for, only later does it turn out that there is something wrong with the means to be taken towards that cause and the ideals. Eventually, Rubashov is accused and imprisoned for crimes he has not committed. Furthermore, he is expected to confess on those alleged crimes; something that prepares him for execution and uproots the idea of opposition among the masses towards the party. Lately he has been rethinking his loyalty because the Party he once believed in has turned into a different direction. The purges and mass executions had made the promised utopian society impossible. During Rubashov's imprisonment, the authority employs panopticon as an apparatus which makes him doubt his innocence through developing rambling thoughts about what he has done. He considers himself an object ridiculed by the present revolutionaries who see themselves as real heirs of the system and find no need of the predecessors anymore. While approaching his end through a reluctant confession, he is torn between continued loyalty and his own conscience which is telling him that the Party vision is to remain just an illusion.

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