

The Female Body and Communist Governmentality: Reading Klara Buda's Chloroform as Conceptual Literature

A Review by Ajkuna Hoppe

Chloroform is Klara Buda's first novel. Yet, the ability of the Albanian born author to mold words as if they were made out of play-doh, has been long in the making, and stems from her extensive experience working as a journalist for Radio France International in Paris. Set in Communist Albania under Enver Hoxha's brutal regime, Chloroform provides a compelling insight into the project of the "new man". It focuses on the oppressive system's efforts to establish a novel, different kind of society: To mold, survey and control the utmost intimacy of its citizen-subjects, their bodies and their sensibilities. Figuring out the dispositions of the population, the ability to ferret out enemies, isolate or annihilate their individuality in this endeavor, goes hand in hand with questions regarding the production and reproduction of this "new wo/man": What attributes should she/he have? What bodily fragments are its constitutive parts, which parts are to be tolerated, which ones not? Which ones are doomed worthy? Which ones are to be punished or disciplined? Which ones go to waste? It is within these liminal crevices of an authoritarian regime's calculated economy of producing uniformity and controlling the "excess", that Buda's Chloroform is situated.

Allow me to reiterate that Chloroform is a historically contextualized work of fiction. Neither does it describe real events, nor does it make any allusion to real-life situations. Buda's novel centers on Alma Fishta and Marenglen or Qano or Qeni. The daughter of an elite communist party member, Alma is part of the *nomenklatura* but has fallen into disgrace by engaging in a relationship with a dissident of the regime, resulting in her being pregnant with his baby. Marenglen (note: a combination of the first syllables from Marx, Engels

and Lenin) is a morgue supervisor and polyhedric character, who provides the necessary paperwork that will supposedly help Alma get an abortion. Even though the narration initially seems to evolve around the issue of abortion, illegal at that time in Albania and Romania, the only two Eastern European countries to prohibit it, it becomes clear that control over female sexuality is but an entry point into a much broader story on Communist governmentality. The power and the ability to structure the possible field of action of others, as Buda seems to tell us throughout the book, in this fictive Albanian case, reaches well beyond the popular Foucauldian panopticon metaphor. Buda's subjects are disciplined (self-governed) less by the inner conscience of fear of being observed by the all-encompassing panopticon, as Foucault suggests, than by the gaze of others. This seems to second anthropologist Katherine Verdery's recent research on the Romanian *Securitate*. As Verdery argues, Communist surveillance practices turn each and every person into a micronic panopticon, leading to the all-encompassing central power to lose its significance. Penal practices aiming at surveilling the bodies' productive and reproductive features, hence is at a loss for its seemingly indirect, observational endeavor. They are turned into an ever enduring active enterprise carried on by the individual.

A colorless, sweet smelling and a dense liquid, whose vapor depresses the central nervous system and allows the performance of various otherwise painful procedures, chloroform is used by the author as metaphor on a multitude of levels. First and foremost, the analogy of the regime functioning as an open air opiate, where entrapped subjects have no way of opting out, is the most obvious one. Second, the author herself, seems like the invisible hand of the admin-

istrator of chloroform. Some suffer and die under the lethal dose (Luiza Kodra the pregnant woman from northern Albania, whose death results in Alma getting an alias identity), some get just about the right dosage (Alma, who amphibiously gets in-an-out of phases), for some, even high dosages of chloroform cease to have any effect (Marenglen), to some others (the veterinary students) chloroform shows no signs of ever being administered. And finally third, by applying the *stream of consciousness* narrative mode, that exposes the character's interior monologues as well as their processes of thought, the reader gets that part of the dialogue which cannot be articulated because of superimposed censorship or auto-censorship. In their hampered speech, printed in italics in the book, the characters create the illusion of a foggy or drunk atmosphere. Some sentences are suspended, interrupted, left flapping in the wind. Applying the streams of consciousness narrative puts Buda in the company of William Faulkner, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf or Jack Kerouac to name but a few. However, in her case, the ability to expose the inner monologues of people caught in a tightly knit web of surveillance, results in Buda performing a Nietzsche-an act of "liberating" the subjects/characters and imbuing them with an agency that they may have lacked in real-life circumstances.

Chloroform may be seen as representing a fusion between a modernist and post-modernist novel. Modernist, in the sense that it deals with existentialist ideas about the liminality of life and death. Alma may be thought of as a Kierkegaardian character: An individual that struggles to give her own life meaning, in spite of the many existential obstacles and distractions put forth by life under Hoxha's Communism such as angst, alienation, absurdity, boredom



and despair. Alma is an existentialist, because we see her struggling to carry on with the pregnancy, which for that specific period in Albanian history, would have been unimaginable and against all "moral" expectations. Continuing that same existential thought, Marenglen is a Kafkaesque and Nietzschean character. He's the lead-person of the utmost surreal and oneiric scenes of the novel and a kind of Nietzsche-an "Uebermensch"; one who defines the nature of its own existence, despite the encapsulating life-circumstances he's thrown into. Being a morgue-supervisor, Marenglen invents his own values and creates the very terms under which he excels. Further, a mutilated person in body and soul, Marenglen, the necrophilic new-man-turned-grotesque, performs subtle acts of resistance against the regime: He sews in hymens and surgically removes them, and helps women get abortions. His resistance becomes even more subtle, as we see him returning back dignity to the disfigured, mutilated and deformed cadavers whose visage had been marred by the authoritarian regime.

Chloroform may be considered a postmodern novel, because the characters act only as "pretexts", as accessories. And it is precisely here that it becomes possible to witness Buda pulling a conceptual-art-mechanism on us: As artist Sol LeWitt, the founder of the conceptual art and minimalism movement has put it, in conceptual art, ideas, planning and decision are made beforehand; their execution is only a perfunctory affair.

Unlike the conventional modes of narration, where the characters experience some sort of development in the course of the story, Buda's characters seem like they are not intended to undergo such an evolution, for they may already embody the conceptual idea in themselves to begin with. Thus, Chloroform has the appearance of conceptual art that has been written down. Here, ideas-in-themselves masked as characters are the perpetuum-mobile that set the narration in motion. They take precedence over any aesthetic or material concerns. Marenglen's range of action has been framed from the outset; the same can be applied to Alma. The veterinary students, who are caught in the seemingly utmost boring every-day activities, do not join forces in resistance against the regime. It is only then that play-doh-ing with words, freeing them from any overly-excessive articulatory weight becomes possible.

In closing, as this Albanian novel is being prepared to be translated into English, Chloroform or "Klara"form if you will, is most likely to set the tone for future literature from the "Post-Communist" region. It is Buda's remarkable ability to tip-toe on eggshells, carefully seeking not to take any moral stances, that allows us for the fraction of a second to de-contextualize the novel from the specific place, Albania and from its historical context, Communism.

¹ Buda, Klara. 2010. *Kloroform*. Tirane: Botimet Dudaj.

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