Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.13.Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

The Totalizing Gaze: A Foucauldian Reading of Power in *The Feast of the Goat*

Jiji P. V.
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Government Brennen College, Thalassery, India
Email: jijimohanan@gmail.com

DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.13.3.373

Article info
Article Received: 14/08/2025
Article Accepted: 03/09/2025
Published online: 08/09/2025

Abstract

The Feast of the Goat by Mario Vargas Llosa is a spine-chilling narrative on the final days of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina who ruled over the Dominican Republic for three decades. Llosa skilfully shifts between three different timelines to offer a comprehensive account of the corrosive impact of the dictator's power. Trujillo's regime is fundamentally built on sovereign power, the traditional form of power exercised by the monarchs during pre-modern times. However, in addition to the sovereign power, the regime also exercises a modern form of power, the biopower that manages and regulates life in the Republic. The study employs Michel Foucault's concept of sovereign power and biopower as the analytical framework to examine how a totalitarian regime of the modern era uses spectacular acts of violence on a macro scale and subtle mechanisms of management at a micro level to achieve total control. It argues that it is the convergence of these two forms of power that make Trujillo's control absolute, leaving no space for dissent, resulting in one of the darkest periods in Dominican History, the Trujillo Era.

Keywords: sovereign power, biopower, absolute, manage, convergence, control

Introduction

The Dictator novel primarily associated with Latin American literature is a prominent literary genre that extensively explores the nature of power, its abuse and devastating effect on the general population. The genre uses real or fictionalised dictators as central characters and employs complex narrative techniques to discuss the multifaceted nature of regimes sustained by the paranoia, megalomania and self-obsession of a tyrant. Power is one of the most potential themes in dictator novels because it infiltrates all aspects of society ranging from the economic aspect to the deeply personal domains of individual existence. *The Feast of the Goat* is a classic example of a dictator novel

which can be considered alongside other popular novels of this genre from Latin America notably, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *I, the Supreme* by Augusto Roa Bastos, *Reasons of State* by Alejo Carpentier and *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez.

The Feast of the Goat by the Peruvian Nobel Prize laureate Mario Vargas Llosa set in the Dominican Republic of the 1960s focuses on the day of Trujillo's assassination and the immediate aftermath of his murder. Trujillo or El Jefe as he came to be called had come to power after a military revolt against President Horacio Vasquez in 1930. His election as the president ignited what is known as one of the darkest days in Dominican history, the Trujillo Era. In *The Feast of the Goat*, Llosa uses a sophisticated three-layered perspective to weave a compelling narrative about the dictator and his totalitarian regime. The events of the day unfold through the perspective of Trujillo himself, that of his assassins and that of Urania Cabral, a successful lawyer who returns to Santo Domingo after her thirty-five yearlong self-imposed exile in the United States. While Trujillo's own narrative set on his final day walks the reader through a mind distorted by fear, perversion and deep-rooted isolation, the assassins' perspectives explain their personal loss, agony and distress that incite revenge against the Chief. However, the most chilling of all narratives is that of Urania who offers a turbulent account of the sexual violence she experiences as a teenager and the profound trauma that shapes her life thereon. Although each of these perspectives depict a distinct picture of Trujillo and his rule, the unifying component in all three is power. Power under Trujillo is not only visible, repressive and centralised, it is also a subtle, pervasive force that operates through covert social conditioning and manipulation. Accordingly, the novel is a brilliant illustration of how power manifests not just as a top-down force practiced by the dictator but as a disciplinary and regulatory mechanism that controls bodies and lives of people in the Republic.

Discussion

The concept of power has been discussed from diverse perspectives. The traditional perspective on power articulated by philosophers like Thomas Hobbes is the sovereign form of power wherein control is seen as a personal asset that is brandished by the king or the State. During the 1970s Michel Foucault's observations presented a radical departure from these traditional understandings. In *The History of Sexuality Vol 1: An Introduction* and in *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault observes that Sovereign power was a dominant and visible form of power in pre-modern societies, headed by the monarch. Public spectacles of death and torture were a "political ritual" (Foucault, *DP* 47) and a "ceremonial of justice" (Foucault, *DP* 261) used to assert the sovereign will. These spectacles instilled fear in the onlookers through an apparent display of the sovereign's right to life and death and paved the way for a dutiful society. Foucault however adds that the sovereign power of the pre-modern times came to be complemented by a new form of power during the 18th century called the Biopower. In modern liberal societies he observes, the right to "take life or let live" (Foucault, *HS* 138) under the sovereign was replaced by the "power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, *HS* 138). By the power over life, which is one of the core characteristics of biopower, Foucault refers to the "calculated management of life" (Foucault, *HS* 140) that operates through two distinct but interconnected poles in modern societies: the anatomo-politics of the human body which refers to the disciplinary power exerted on individual bodies to make them compliant and manageable. The disciplinary power aims at upgrading the body into an efficient work force so that they would contribute productively to the socio-economic growth of the society. The second pole, the biopolitics of the population, refers to the oppressive regulatory power that is

exercised over a population in order to make it healthier and productive so as to ensure order and conformity.

Dictatorial states fundamentally differ from modern liberal societies in terms of the foundational principles of governance and civic engagement. These states are a form of sovereign power in which the dictator performs with unchecked authority. Nevertheless, seen through Foucault's lens a dictatorial state can also be considered as a form of biopower as it operates through propaganda and state-controlled publicity apparatuses. Foucault's explicit discussions on Biopower therefore offer a powerful framework for studying the dynamics of power and the subtle mechanisms of control that are used by these regimes to sustain themselves.

Trujillo exercises one of the most brutal forms of sovereign power. His secret police force and death squad headed by the feared Johny Abbes Garcia engages in extensive undercover work to monitor anti-trujillista activities and to quash any chance of a potential political coup. The SIM is a pervasive force that ensures his sovereignty in the Dominican Republic. It is the primary mechanism through which executions, disappearances, murders, and abductions are handled by the regime. The torture chamber of the SIM follows a pre-modern system of penal procedure wherein torture is used to extract a "confession" which would then be considered the "truth of the crime" (Foucault, *DP* 43). It is a feared secret interrogation centre encircled by a high concrete wall with "cells that held clusters of naked men …an acrid, sharp odor of excrement, vomit and burned flesh" (Llosa 393). Foucault observes that pre-modern societies abide by a " legal code of pain" where " torture, punishment… is calculated according to detailed rules: the number of lashes of the whip, the positioning of the branding iron, the duration of the death agony on the stake or the wheel…the type of mutilation to be used…all these various elements multiply the punishments and are combined according to the court and the crime" (Foucault, *DP* 34). Although the SIM operates outside a legal framework, punishment orchestrated by it follows a meticulously detailed code of pain. The degree of torture was directly proportional to the gravity of the crime committed. Salvador, one of the assassins is tortured with electric shock which catapults him against the bonds that had held him down. The *calies* would seat him on the Throne and flog him with whips that tore his skin to pieces. Between fainting spells, he would be revived by a bucket of water or an injection by the SIM doctor so that he could confess even more:

> "Is it true that Pupo Roman is part of the plot?" asked Ramfis's discordant voice.
>
> "Yes, yes," he said, not recognizing his own voice. "That coward, that traitor, yes. He lied to us. Kill me, General Tru-jillo, but let my wife and children go. They're innocent."
>
> "It won't be that easy, asshole," Ramfis replied. "Before you go to hell, you have to pass through purgatory. You son of a bitch!" (Llosa 394)

Foucault argues that this form of punishment that involves destroying the body of the offender is a quintessential example of how power was used to legitimize the sovereign's vengeance. It is a terrifying reminder of the "dissymmetry of forces" (Foucault, *DP* 55); the absolute power of the dictator and the vulnerable self of the offender. During one of his encounters with Henry Chirinos, the Chief warns the "Constitutional Sot" of the possible consequences of a breach of this dissymmetry, "You know that if you steal from me and I find out, I would turn you over to Johny Abbes…he 'd take you to La Cuarenta, sit you on the throne, and burn you to a crisp…." (Llosa 137). Such excesses of torture extended even beyond death. Antonio, one of the assassins recounts the disrespect shown to his brother's body after he gets murdered by the SIM, "they took his body out of the vehicle and carelessly threw it into the

heartsease in the little garden at the entrance …the rope of his alleged suicide still around his neck" (Llosa 100).

Throughout History, dictators have manipulated the masses by encouraging them to participate in ritualistic practices like cult worship. In the Dominican Republic, the State promotes cult worship of the Chief through certain extravagant titles like the Benefactor, the Father of the Nation, the Generalissimo and Dr Rafael L Molina. The capital city of Santo Domingo is renamed "Ciudad Trujillo", roads, schools and bridges are named after him and every door bears a bronze plaque that boasts: "In this house Trujillo is the Chief" (Llosa 9). In his speech at the Fine Arts, the puppet president Balaguer offers a "realistic interpretation" of God and Trujillo. The god-like reverence conferred on Trujillo by the intellectuals of the regime is not an act of sycophantic praise but a calculated, well-thought-out move to defend his divine stature. The cult of personality built around Trujillo transforms him into a superhuman figure and the popular legends of a sleepless and sweatless Chief instill perpetual fear in the Dominicans for the Sublime whose will remains indisputable.

Trujillo's sovereign control is profoundly arbitrary. Human rights violations and breach of law is the norm. Personal whims of the Chief, his desires, fears and sexual interests dictate state policies and fate of individuals. Defined by unpredictability, the regime nurtures fear and anxiety among the public, making an organised resistance or a military coup an extreme possibility. Agustin Cabral who gets expelled overnight from the Presidency of the Senate is an early victim of the Chief's terrifying mood swings. Cabral remains ignorant about the reason for expulsion and makes desperate efforts to regain favour by offering his teen daughter to the Chief. However, Trujillo's inability to perform with the girl digs up his deep-seated fears and insecurities. The fact that a "stupid skinny little bitch" (Llosa 278) could mortify him by exposing his impotence solidifies his anger for her father. In a fit of rage, the dictator charges him with misuse of public funds, files lawsuits and breaks him emotionally with slander.

Power in the regime is "essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies and ultimately life itself" (Foucault, *HS* 136). The dictator subjects his high-ranking officials to a "test" of loyalty wherein he expects their wives and daughters to indulge with him in exchange of rewards and promotions to their men. While the "gift" of a woman brought men temporary favours, the trauma resulting from the violation of bodily autonomy, destroyed these women psychologically and physically. Urania returns thirty-five years after her self-imposed exile and confronts her father for his cowardice and for the profound suffering his slavishness to the regime had caused her, "do you know why I could never forgive you? Because you were never really sorry. After so many years of serving the Chief, you had lost your scruples, your sensitivity, the slightest hint of rectitude…become heartless, a monster like your Chief" (Llosa 120).

Although the regime is fundamentally built on sovereign power, it uses the modern mechanism of biopower to manipulate the Dominican national identity. Apart from gruesome tortures, killings and sexual violations, it heavily relies on anatomo-political tools of discipline and training to control bodies. One of the disciplinary techniques used by the regime is that of "instrumental coding of the body" (Foucault, *DP* 153). By making the body instrumental, the regime expected its men to exhibit "good" conduct which was considered standardized behaviour. For instance, Trujillo "did not allow slovenliness or disorder in any officer … a missing button, a spot or wrinkle on trousers or tunic, a carelessly placed visored cap were grave faults punishable by several days of rigorous discipline and, at times, expulsion and a return to the regular battalions" (Llosa 29). The cumulative impact of all this disciplining was a

body that was "subjected"," practised" and "docile" (Foucault, *DP*138).

Hierarchical observation and Normalizing judgement are other disciplinary mechanisms used to manage bodies. The National Palace in the Dominican Republic is an observatory, a "disciplinary apparatus that would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly…a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned (Llosa 173). Trujillo's "gaze" is one of the most recurring motifs in the novel. As a child, Lieutenant Garcia Guerrero had heard of the "Gaze": "A gaze that no one could endure without lowering his own eyes, intimidated and annihilated by the force radiating from those piercing eyes that seemed to read one's most secret thoughts and most hidden desires and made people feel naked" (Llosa 37). However, the disciplinary gaze could not monitor all time so it needed relays that would disseminate power from the centre to the margins (Foucault, *DP* 174). Under Trujillo, these relays are the SIM, the media and his loyalists. The SIM had a network of spies and informants that monitored people, places and gatherings and collected confidential information for the regime. This created a climate of fear and anxiety and resulted in people's internalising self -discipline and self-control. The media acts as a relay by suppressing information and by becoming a primary tool for state propaganda. Just days after Tovito's "first" death, Antonio recounts how the state's informational frameworks like the *El Caribe* and *La Nacion*, the Dominican Voice television and radio stations and a dozen small newspapers published a letter reportedly written by his brother to explain his "suicide". Although it is true that this power apparatus has the Chief as its Head, it is the network as a whole that exercises control. Foucault's concept of power is highly relevant with respect to the Trujillo regime wherein the SIM, the Media and the Chief's loyalists' team up to form the network of forces that constitute the power structure

Normalizing judgement is another disciplinary tool used to produce "docile" bodies through practices like differentiation and exclusion. Trujillo forces his men to meet some standard norms of behaviour that are an extension of his work ethic, physical appearance and morality. Not complying with these norms would be detrimental to one's life and family. From the moment Cabral falls out of favour, he is differentiated, publicly humiliated and excluded. Devoid of friends and acquaintances, he is hounded by his past. His daughter's estrangement leaves him scarred and psychologically wounded for the rest of his life. Cabral's paralyzed body can be interpreted as a reflection of the long-term dehumanising impact of these new mechanisms of disciplinary control. His persistent vegetative existence is a disturbing reminder of how differentiation and exclusion can destroy one's individual being. Trujillo's use of anatomo-politics to discipline and manage individual bodies eventually results in an erasure of personal identities and in the production of a homogenous national identity that revolves around his Cult image.

While the anatomo-political pole of biopower focuses on disciplining individuals through hierarchical surveillance and normalization, biopolitics in the Republic is concerned with managing the population as a whole. Foucault observes that in modern liberal societies, racism is not a product of prejudice, rather it is a regulatory tool used to "fragment" and "divide" races based on the hierarchy of the "superior" and the "inferior". By framing the "other" as a biological threat to the purity and health of the superior race, the state justifies its "death function" as an attempt to "let" the dominant race live a better life (*Society must be Defended* 256). Violence and killing are rationalized in State discourses as an imperative cleansing measure to protect the life of a population. These discourses target mass identification with State ideology and create a

sense of collective identity against the enemy from within. Trujillo and his men label the Haitian massacre as an act of defence against colonization. He asserts that "for the sake of this country, I have stained these with blood…to keep the blacks from colonizing us again. There were tens of thousands of them, and they were everywhere. If I hadn't …the handful of white survivors would be serving the blacks. That was my most difficult decision in thirty years of government." (Llosa193). His regime widely promoted the narrative of Dominican "whiteness" and European heritage to foster hatred against Haitians. The anti-Haitian propaganda projected him as a national saviour and legitimised his dictatorship by convincing the Dominicans that his existence was crucial for their survival.

Conclusion

Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* reveals how a totalitarian regime serves as a prototypical example of sovereign authority through systematic tools of political control. However, Trujillo had deep seated anxieties about being overthrown. Loss of international support and intelligence reports of CIA sponsored unrest building up from within, intensified his paranoia. It is ironic that despite his iron -fisted control, Trujillo had to chalk out an elaborate security protocol with bullet proof cars, unpredictable travel routes and heavily armed security guards to curtail his fears of an attempt on his life. He was convinced that he could not rule by terror alone and that for effective long -term control, he must create a comprehensive system of governance by integrating biopower into his repressive sovereign power structure. As a consequence, his use of biopower was a strategic move to curb aggression from within by creating "docile" subjects that complied with state policies. By training individuals to stick to schedules and to abide by social norms, the dictatorship quite thoughtfully used biopower to influence behaviour. By fabricating the official narrative, they rationalized its use as a generous move for the collective well-being of the population and convinced them of the indispensability of the regime for their existence. It may be concluded that Under Trujillo, the sovereign right to "take life" intersected with the "power to foster life". Controlled by the threat of punishment and the fear of death, the Dominicans lived through the horrors of the regime, until Trujillo was assassinated on 30th May 1961, ending thirty yearlong tyranny and repression in the Dominican Republic.

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