

## SOCIALISM OF THE SPAN ONE GROUP IN BESSIE HEAD'S "THE PRISONER WHO WORE GLASSES": A MARXIST READING

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### Abstract

Authors frequently highlight solidarity in literary works, particularly in short stories, to increase the readers' understanding of the unbalanced economic progress experienced by a certain social class. This attempt happens because they try to create an idealistic society for the working class. From this premise, solidarity was born due to the inability of capitalism to undo the oppression of the working class throughout the decades. Adjusting to capitalist society, the working class is often unconsciously or consciously mistreated to be seen as equal to the upper class. Since socialism is perfectly captured in Bessie Head's "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses," this research aims to analyze the solidarity of the Span One group portrayed in the short story by using Mason's solidarity, Roskin's social democracy theories, and Uwe's qualitative descriptive method. The researcher confirms that the Span One group is portrayed as socialists through their solidarity and social democracy in "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" short story. These ideas can be seen through Brille and Span One group's actions and dialogs.

## INTRODUCTION

Occasionally, the capitalists feared that their counterparts would ever acquire society. In this case, according to Patnaik, the economic agents—the proletariat—were objects of oppression, exploited not by the bourgeois but by the system itself, and if they realized such tyranny, the system would be ruined (Patnaik, 2008, p. 17). Thus, the well-aware workers, in this case, the socialists, are seen as potential threats to the capitalists. Fortunately, since the damnation of the Soviet bloc around the late 1980s, the situation has been reversed for both sides—capitalism has dethroned socialism until today. However, capitalism is not as perfect as it offers. The distinction between socioeconomic classes has always been an intriguing discussion in a capitalist society. As a cause of the ‘problematic’ description of limiting everyone from a specific economic background to having equal opportunity, an expert, such as Marx, proposed the idea of socialism to deal with this problem. Socialism, in Marx’s terms, offers to create a more equal society by prioritizing the needs of the community over the interests of individual capitalists or business owners (Newman, 2005). By doing so, the socialists approached a utopian, classless society where people could have unquestionably equal opportunities despite their various economic backgrounds. This dreamy society where the community could control the means of production still has a place in many scholars’ hearts.

Generally, socialism attempts to defend the inequalities of power and wealth (Newman, 2005). Specifically, power and wealth are the most exploited in capitalism, which was opposed by the socialists. The responsible man behind the term, Karl Marx, claimed that socialism could provide a productive society without class distinction, policy money, or even government (Roskin, 2017, p. 35). The authority will no longer be needed due to the unavailability of private property. Similar to the government, which is merely a tool of class dominance, the extinction of distinct classes will eliminate its existence.

Therefore, socialism is suitable for unraveling solidarity through a working-class group. This study is intended to examine the concepts of socialism and solidarity portrayed in Bessie Head’s short story. The short story titled “The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” revolves around a prisoner named Brille who proposes an agreement with the warder Hannetjie regarding both sides’ interests. Brille claims that either he or his prison group were punished altogether or not at all. Many experts glorify this particular idea as the foundation of socialism. To eliminate these privileges, socialism challenges capitalism in its relationship with means of production, which is fundamental to capitalism, and establishes an environment without barriers that are based on class inequalities (Newman, 2005). To do so, socialism proposes constructing an egalitarian society based on solidarity and teamwork. Encouraged by the idea of common

interest, socialism, through the value of solidarity, always sees competitiveness and self-interest in human behaviors as products of capitalist society, and it is their role to reshape them. Thus, this study reveals that Bessie Head utilizes socialism to subvert the notions of socioeconomic distinction in her short story. Not to mention, the short story is massively group-centered, which means that the capitalist structure is highly challenged in the short story as being identical to the real world.

Further, several previous pieces of study focus on how well-aware characters in literary works execute equal opportunity and commonality to expand the working class' potential. The objective is to establish a society in which individuals are not subjected to labor exploitation, giving everyone the chance to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. These studies show that the type of socialism exhibited by the characters defies capitalism's private ownership, where means of production are dictated to be owned by the bourgeois.

To begin with, Erviyan Ragil Wicaksono's study on dystopia and Orwell's Pitfall in George Orwell's *1984* (1949) demonstrate how people frequently pursue equality, affection, truth, and solidarity. Wicaksono investigates the novel's conflict to prove that, despite people's claimed preference for socialism over capitalism, it still represents freedom of speech, which is usually absent in socialism. Additionally, the work manifests Orwell's criticisms regarding the simplicity with which the system might suppress individuals' attempts to pursue basic human rights in a dystopian society (Wicaksono, 2014). Unfortunately, this research strictly focuses on acknowledging the existence of socialism in the novel and fails to point out the concept of social democracy, which consists of freedom of speech in a socialist society.

In addition, Bramaditya, in his study *Ambivalence of Identity and Dislocation Seen in "Lotus Eater" by W. Somerset Maugham and "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" by Bessie Head*, reveals that the interactions among the characters in the short stories have the potential to create complex circumstances about their cultural identities, resulting in a loss of their sense of belonging (Bramaditya, 2019). The individuals had uncertainty regarding their identity as a result of opposing cultures and various influences, particularly when they held opposing perspectives on a particular value. As a result, the warden experiences subordination from the prisoners; conversely, the prisoners can assert dominance towards the warden. However, because Bramaditya's study only recognizes the dynamic power within cultural identities, it overlooks the possibility of power dynamics as a challenge to overthrow capitalism.

Further, in literary works, characters frequently serve as agents to address their authors' dilemmas or ideologies. Characters in Bessie Head's short story, for instance, advocate for a proper social condition for the working class. Since Bessie Head is a socialist author and

socialism, as explained earlier, prioritizes the needs of the community rather than individual interests, “The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” represents the potential and capability of the working class as those who share common injustice. Hence, this research aims to address the manifestations of socialism, specifically social democracy and solidarity, in Bessie Head’s short story.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Socialism**

Despite the equality movements among laborers that often happen nowadays, socialism remains relevant to be learned and analyzed in terms of how the bourgeois master human civilization in society. Capitalism is steady in its integrity, socialism is reevaluating its approach, and communism has mostly faded from public consciousness since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, which marked the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Newman, 2005, p. 129-312). Socialist governments in Cuba and North Korea have survived class struggles for decades. Dobie argues that the root of class struggles is in unequal economic relationships, which is the essence of socialism (Dobie, 2012, p. 84). Hypothetically, socialism could offer a better economic system and eliminate class distinctions that have been faced for years since the Industrial Revolution.

Moreover, the vast majority of socialists believe that positive transformation is achievable through individual effort (Newman, 2005, p. 3). In this case, some socialist scholars have placed such an emphasis on economic determinism that it has been difficult to identify their belief in the power of the individual to effect change. Similar to its counterpart, socialism asserts that people may stop seeing themselves as products of destiny, custom, tradition, or faith and start seeing themselves as controlled subjects of history (Newman, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, once humans see civilization as a circle of a never-ending economic system, it will be difficult to enlighten them about economic oppression. Thus, it can be concluded that instead of promoting economic freedom like capitalism, socialism offers association, community, and cooperation—qualities that were ruined by capitalism. At last, instead of being happy about the supposed progress that capitalism was bringing, socialists were worried about the huge inequality it was creating, as former farmers and craftsmen were forced to move to overcrowded cities and work in new factories for pitifully low wages.

## **Marxists' Solidarity**

Historically, a greater sense of community has emerged following a time of social turbulence and economic progress, when people have reason to hope for continued stability. People feel disadvantaged when they want something and think they have a right to get it; however, they see no way to get it because of capitalism's restrictions. Movements focused on gaining power typically form when people believe that structural changes are their best chance for overcoming an obstacle (Mason, 1989, p. 42). He added that the fast social and economic changes following World War II, including significant advances in the standard of living, education, and efforts to address the basic material requirements of society, provided the foundation for the creation of solidarity (Mason, 1989, p. 43). Therefore, it feels necessary to continue the framework provided by teamwork under the umbrella of solidarity.

Moreover, on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1980, there was a massive change in Polish policy regarding the sale of meat products. One day later, the policy was publicly applied, although a similar policy had been applied twice earlier that decade. As we may expect, the workers were affected by the increasing prices and conducted a huge wave of protests and strikes around the whole country. During the first day of the protest, their concerns were mostly economic: wage increases and a return to the old meat prices. Later on, the workers demanded that their wages be raised, the system of family subsidies be modified (the workers asked for the police and security force employees' same benefits), and that more meat and food be made available to them. At long last, they were calling for better wages, social security benefits, and health care (Korbonski, 1995, p. 183-184).

Further, these workers' demonstrations were founded on shared experiences of oppression. Their shared experience of being used as cheap labor fuels their strong sense of solidarity. Solidarity is a term often used by socialists to denote the fight against exploitation by a group whose members share a political consciousness (Lamb & Docherty, 2006, p. 389). When socialists use this term, they usually refer to members of the working class. Although solidarity is commonly thought of as a labor union today, it was and is primarily a social movement. Similarly to its original meaning, the term solidarity today refers to the action of a group of people who have come together to demand a shift in the status quo. Solidarity, as a phenomenon, tends to question established norms, social connections, and ethical principles of a given society, thereby requiring alterations in the economic and political framework that would have contained significant modifications (Mason, 1989, p. 41-42).

Consequently, nowadays, solidarity is considered a human right regarding each individual being part of communities in social groups such as local communities, national or political

communities, and regional or international communities (Scholz, 2014, p. 54). In this case, an individual's right to gain solidarity from certain communities is consistent with other human rights. States can have some rights derived from the individual right to solidarity, and the objective of those rights is to ensure that individuals may exercise their rights. The ability of states to facilitate the rights of their residents is also ensured by a regional organization, which guarantees the states.

### **Social Democracy**

Despite social intervention in market policies being advocated by socialists, society still requires democratic participation. Consequently, this approach expects both participation from socialists and capitalists to perform social democracy. In this particular context, social democracy, according to Roskin, forbids state ownership of industry (Roskin, 2017, p. 36). The fundamental goal is to increase industrial production, effectively reach new markets, and create high-quality employment for employees. Instead of encouraging state ownership of industry, social democracy utilizes welfare programs such as health coverage, substantial pensions, and subsidized food and housing to enhance the living conditions of its people. Thus, social democracy is a moderate version of socialism that supports welfare policies without advocating for state control of industries. Further, the collapse of capitalism and revolution, according to Bernstein, is not necessarily marked as the establishment of socialism, but rather social democracy (Roskin, 2017, p. 36). To achieve this society, social democracy, as Baur proposed, aims to effectively transition capitalism into socialism through practice (Czerwińska-Schupp & Żurowski, 2017, p. 248).

Similarly, social democracy, according to Meyer and Hinchman, is the embodiment of a social condition that adopts the accuracy of modern democracy and ties itself to human rights (Meyer & Hinchman, 2007, p. 1). They said that social democracy could be looked at from different angles. As a theory, social democracy tries to find the right balance between legitimacy, effectiveness, and security. Conversely, as an empirical study, it tends to show the problems with libertarian democracy, which is solely focused on a formal, procedural way of making decisions. In a world that is becoming more worldwide, social democracy is kept as a model and guide. However, social democracy should also bring attention to the ways that society is becoming more democratic that do not involve the government's social security system (Meyer & Hinchman, 2007, p. 4). One important way to evaluate the political system and even the whole field of social services is to look at whether the people who make political choices are also the ones who have to follow them.

Further, social democracy, as a concept, is required to include every element of society as it serves an important role in guaranteeing the full accomplishment of all human rights in everyday life. As regarded by social democracy, these elements are the political structure, the framework of basic rights, the political public domain, the culture of politics, the private sector, modules of social democratic development, political economy, education, and international cooperation (Meyer & Hinchman, 2007, p. 7). However, to achieve social democracy, these elements require political actors, who can be identified through three approaches: recognizing their political, social, and economic interests that are associated with social democracy; providing a historical perspective by introducing them to relevant or similar experiences that previous social democrats have struggled to accomplish; and finally, unifying them based on their positions in society (Meyer & Hinchman, 2007, p. 70). In short, social democracy must involve universally relevant principles that bring together all aspects of a community.

## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative method, which, according to Flick, attempts to evaluate the values of social products such as topics, events, or practices by studying texts and images through the researcher's interpretation rather than numbers and statistics through respondents (Flick, 2009, p. 472). The object of this research is Bessie Head's "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses," a short story that is withdrawn from Paul Williams' *Encounters from Africa: An Anthology of Short Stories* (2000) anthology. Additionally, since this study unravels the practices of socialism, especially solidarity, it will use Marxist reading, a form of analyzing literature that says an author's social class and the dominant ideology of that class (Barry, 2002, p. 151). Therefore, the qualitative method is the most suitable for evaluating the social practices of socialism in Head's "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" short story. In addition to the data collection, the data is obtained by extensively reading the short story, examining, identifying, and taking the relevant issues, either from the narratives or the characters' dialogs, that represent socialist issues.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This section clarifies the attempts to unravel the socialist concept portrayed in the South African short story "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses." These attempts are presented through the solidarity and social democracy of the Span One group members. This discussion is divided into two sections. To begin with, it explores the efforts offered by socialist characters to subvert

social injustice, such as the exploitation of laborers and private ownership. In addition, it will cover social democrats' characters who encourage humanizing the industrial production process without interference by the government, authority, and states, which is the framework of capitalism.

Bessie Head's work tries to balance the socialist concept of solidarity among laborers while maintaining capitalists' democratic participation through a group of prisoners. Hence, this research exhibits that the manifestation of social democracy in Head's short story defies the exploitation of labor and private ownership of capitalist culture. This research regards Head's short story using socialism and Marxist solidarity theories by Michael Newman and social democracy theory by Michael Roskin. These theories serve to acknowledge the solidarity and social democracy that are embraced by the characters.

### **The Portrayal of Marxist Solidarity in Bessie Head's "Prisoner Who Wore Glasses"**

Solidarity increases as a sign among individuals who advocate for similar objectives. The principle is demonstrated by those who share common ground and work together. The term solidarity, as stated by Komter, derives from French which means "the communion of interests and mutual responsibility" (Rozakou, 2020, p. 197). In this way, solidarity is seen as a manifestation that keeps people together, whether it is because they share the same norms and values or because they work together for a shared good. Solidarity leads to the better utilization of human rights and welfare amongst laborers. Conversely, solidarity barely appears within the capitalist society. As Rimlinger describes, it is a problem arising from a conflict in human rights significantly rooted in the history of capitalism and modern mass democracy: the struggle between private ownership and social rights (Rimlinger, 1983, p. 51). Thus, this problem is rooted in modern democracy which consequently forces laborers to embrace socialism and subvert capitalism.

Further, attempts to embrace socialism are recognizable within countries that are particularly against the right-wing ideology of capitalism. In South Africa, the investigation of South African left-wing groups from the Act of Union to the middle of the 20th century reveals a contradictory relationship between Marxist ideology and practical implementation, frequently resulting in temporary partnerships (Johns, 1964, p. 16). The history of the Labour Party is characterized by contradictory beliefs, serving primarily to maintain the privileged position of the white working class in South Africa in both political and economic spheres.

In addition, Durkheim proposes that solidarity is separated into mechanical and organic (Rozakou, 2020, p. 197). Durkheim claimed that mechanical solidarity is a feature of traditional,

unchanged societies and is based on how similar and the same people's values and beliefs are. Conversely, the latter version is a feature of modern societies with their diversity and complex division of labor which means functional interdependence and balance are the roots of solidarity in modern cultures.

Lamb and Docherty observe that solidarity is a concept frequently employed by socialists by a group of individuals who possess a shared political awareness to describe the collective resistance to exploitation. This means they either experience common advantages or unfortunates. "We're in for trouble this time, comrades" (in Williams, 2000, p. 234). The Span One group is introduced as one of the most common prison groups in South Africa. This group continuously asserts dominance over the prison guards due to their solidarity and common interests. In this group, either they all succeed or are punished altogether. According to Mason, the Span One group is considered to be performing solidarity to obtain power, typically when they believe that structural changes are their best chance for overcoming an obstacle. In this case, the Span One group's socialism is presented to subvert the exploitation of labor, whereas, in the short story, human rights are overlooked by capitalists to exploit laborers.

"Never mind, brother," they said. "What happens to one of us, happens to all" (in Williams, 2000, p. 234). The Span One group, as the center of the short story, indicates socialism such as solidarity, which is performed through how they all receive punishment as a result of Brille's mistakes. It is shown when Warder Hannetjie asserts punishment for the Span One group. Brille, one of the members of the Span One group, who possesses a shortsighted condition, constantly drops cabbages when he is supposed to move them. The Span One group's solidarity is also exposed when Brille tries to express his gratitude towards Span One, who was willing to be punished because of him (in Williams, 2000, p. 235). Additionally, the Span One group, as a socialist community, confronts the exploitation of laborers, whereby such actions are necessarily required to be eliminated and replaced with socialism.

Finally, in the story, the Span One group's socialist quality such as solidarity is performed in the way Brille's capability to provide equal opportunity and condition which makes him a person who is a well-aware worker. It is shown when Brille asserts the power and advantages that are possessed by the Span One group over the prison's warder, "I can give you anything you want," Warder Hannetjie said in desperation. "It's not only me but the whole of Span One," said Brille cunningly" (in Williams, 2000, p. 238). Brille's negotiation skill is depicted when he plans to utilize their advantages to expose the Warder as a thief. He refuses to take the proposition given by the Warder because it would only be beneficial for him. Brille's solidarity is exposed when he negotiates a better proposition for the whole Span One group. Additionally,

Brille as a socialist character challenges the exploitation of workers that is conveyed by the capitalist whereby performing socialism is essential for encouraging human rights, social justice, and equality.

### **Span One Group's Social Democracy in Bessie Head's "Prisoner Who Wore Glasses"**

Social democrats possess complexity which had an important impact on how they influence their politics. Comparatively, the social democrats were more politically advantageous over their opponents – capitalists (Rose & Ross, 1994, p. 446). In this case, the social democrats said that their national capitalism would be better managed, coordinated, and more rational and successful if the most important political jobs were given to the social democrats. This is because social democratic movements were becoming more controlled by a class of lawmakers, intellectuals, and high administrators. Secondly, social democrats considered themselves modernists and supported enhancing social programs to help those most affected by the dynamic economic restructuring while still preserving as much of the national safety net state as possible within budgetary limits. Besides, the adjustment in social democracy was also a response to the decline and splitting up of the working class, which used to be the most important social and conceptual group in older versions of social democracy (Rose & Ross, 1994, p. 447). Therefore, the latter version of social democracy was much less focused on workers and classes than its predecessor. Instead of serving a class and its organizations, it was looking for power by getting votes from different groups and constituencies that wanted to make capitalism more civilized and humanitarian.

Additionally, the socialist movement, according to Donal Sassoon, is never expected to achieve socialism, but rather civilized capitalism (McKnight, 2004, p. 243). Its primary accomplishment lies in the socialist's ability to convince capitalists to adopt some of their principles. As a result, many of their objectives are accomplished, such as features like voting rights, the eight-hour workday, and laws that supervise working conditions, particularly for women and children. They could enhance economic modernization but are inefficient in transforming a capitalist society into a socialist one.

Further, Ambedkar asserts that a democratic government requires a democratic society, as the formal idea of democracy is irrelevant without social democracy (Dwivedi & Sinha, 2005, p. 662). The politicians failed to recognize that democracy is not a type of government but rather a type of society. Social Democrats should demonstrate a mindset of respect and equality towards their fellow citizens. Social organizations should be free of arbitrary social challenges. The Span One group is introduced in the story as a prison group that possesses advantages by

being resourceful, assertive, solidaristic, and so on. They also have a member named Brille, who is expected to be the leader of the group. The Span One group, according to Meyer & Hinchman's theory, is considered the manifestation of a social condition that adopts the accuracy of modern democracy and encourages itself to respect human rights. This way, the Span One group's social democracy quality is presented to subvert the exploitation of human rights, whereas, in the story, human rights are massively ignored by the capitalists.

In the story, the Span One group as a prisoner group is characterized as defying the concept of capitalism in terms of the exploitation of laborers while encouraging welfare and human rights. Brille, as a spokesman and father figure of the Span One group, is portrayed as solidaristic and equitable. The Span One group's social democracy is introduced when Brille explains the democratic participation within the group in choosing Warder Hanneljje as their associate, "It's not tobacco we want, but you," he said. "We want you on our side. We want a good warder because, without a good warder, we won't be able to manage the long stretch ahead" (in Williams, 2000, p. 238). The Span One group is widely known for its massive influence around the prison. Their social democracy is depicted in terms of propositions they give that could benefit both the Span One group and Warder Hanneljje (in Williams, 2000, p. 238). In this way, the Span One group signifies that social democracy resembles socialism and capitalism in terms of human welfare and laborers' collaboration in production policies. Further, the Span One's democratic tendency can also be seen below:

"He had a way of producing unheard-of luxuries like boiled eggs from his farm nearby and things like cigarettes, and Span One responded nobly and got the reputation of being the best work span in the camp. And it wasn't only taken from their side. They were awfully good at stealing commodities like fertilizer which were needed on the farm of Warder Hanneljje" (Williams, 2000, p. 238).

Further, the Span One group is portrayed as the most influential social democrats' group within the prison, especially since they join forces with Warder Hanneljje. As social democrats, their actions are depicted when they are capable of being advantageous towards one another. The Span One group constantly manages to steal commodities such as fertilizer for Warder Hanneljje's farm. Conversely, Warder Hanneljje possesses the ability to bring outside luxuries such as boiled eggs and cigarettes for the Span One group. Thus, the Span One group and Warder Hanneljje's social democracy are categorized as socialism, where their actions are justice-oriented and democratically participatory to encourage human rights, welfare, and social equality.

## CONCLUSION

This research utilized the concept of solidarity and social democracy; therefore, it expected to participate in the literary fields of socialism and Marxism depicted in Bessie Head's short story. The solidarity pictured in the short story subverts the capitalist concept through the presence of socialist characters who perform social democracy and solidaristic participation. The Span One group's solidarity is a form of socialism that is meant to challenge the circumstances of capitalism and successfully diminish the exploitation of laborers, where solidarity is performed as a rebellion by workers. Brille and Warder Hannetje's social democracy is a form of alliance between socialists and capitalists that is meant to equally encourage human rights and laborers' participation.

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