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# Sovereign Power and *Nuda Vita* in Ruta Sepetys's *I Must Betray You*: Unveiling the Struggles of Romanian Civilians In 1989

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## ABSTRACT

*I Must Betray You* (2022), a literary work by Ruta Sepetys, is a touching drawing of the painful experience suffered by Romanian civilians under Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime in 1989. Through a rich tapestry of policies, regulations, and prohibitions, Ceaușescu bound Romanian life to *nuda vita*. This study aims to analyze how Ruta Sepetys' *I Must Betray You* illustrated the sovereign power that restrains Romanian civilians' lives and how the civilians detached from *nuda vita* and the sovereign power. It employs a qualitative descriptive approach by drawing on the theoretical framework put forth by Giorgio Agamben. The framework encompasses crucial concepts such as sovereign power, the state of exception, and *nuda vita*. Notably, the sovereign power represents an authority to create laws but remains unbound. The state of exception refers to a blurred zone of "law and life". Besides, *nuda vita* embodies the condition in which an individual's life is vulnerable to death without being considered a sacrifice. The study reveals two primary findings. First, restrict any criticism directed at Ceaușescu, exiting Romania, gathering in groups of more than three individuals, engaging in conversations with foreigners, possessing typewriters, and many other prohibitions. The authorities also exercised rigid control over civilians' basic needs, from access to electricity to food, and imposed strict laws. The sovereign power restrained Romanian civilians' lives through various methods to instill fear, such as utilizing Phillips, i.e., tapping devices, widely spread within households. Second, the civilians' revolts against the sovereign power and *nuda vita* were manifested through strategies like adopting a double-agent role, utilizing knowledge as propaganda, and building allies with soldiers. The novelty of this study proposes a path towards detachment from the sovereign power and *nuda vita*, particularly relevant to contemporary debates.

**Keywords:** *I Must Betray You*, *nuda vita*, Romanian civilians, state of exception, the sovereign power

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## INTRODUCTION

Terror is an apparatus used by all communist regimes in Eastern Europe as an instrument of the

Marxist-Leninist revolution (Deletant, 2015: 1). As in Romania, Securitate terror is an intrinsic feature

of totalitarianism and communist regime systems. The Securitate has a crucial role in getting rid of the regime's enemies and population classes that are "considered" obstacles to the running of a centralized economy based on the regime carried out by Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania (Deletant, 2015: 1). In addition, the Securitate also operates to eliminate opponents to consolidate power and to ensure the obedience of Romanian civilians to the Ceaușescu's regime (Deletant, 2015: 1). The Securitate's pressure spread randomly, not only to the guilty civilians but also to everyone else in Romania. It causes anyone to have the potential to become a victim in Romania (Manea, 2018: 131). Victims can be punished even just because they are "considered" dangerous or disloyal to the communist regime (Manea, 2018: 131).

It correlates with the novel *I Must Betray You*, which conveys the tyrannical terror against civil society under pressure from the Securitate led by the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, especially Bucharest city in Romania. In the narrative, the sovereign prohibits Romanian civilians from getting news, electricity, freedom, and food, such as they should line for a long time to buy limited necessities. That is why, this research is essential to study. The occurrence described in the novel is attested in Bucharest Newspaper written by Whitney (1989); Romanian civilians had to stand in line to buy quarter-pound butter, sausages, and fatty strips of bacon at the deli. On the other hand, private farmers' markets offer planned onions, carrots, and potatoes thirty to thirty-five percent higher than in the last five years (Whitney, 1989).

Romanian civilians are also prohibited from listening to radio broadcasts, and electricity is only turned on at certain hours. In addition, the Securitate always supervise Romanian civilians and their minions; the Securitate is not allowed to talk to strangers or gather more than three people. This occurrence is still connected with Whitney's report (1989) in Bucharest Newspaper, Ceaușescu's communist regime prohibited civilians from talking directly with foreign visitors unless they reported their conversations to the Securitate. Ceaușescu used the Securitate—the secret police—to operate his decisions and policies within the communist regime system (Whitney, 1989). In Deletant (2015: 1), the elite members carry out the destruction of civilians, and afterwards create new civilians that are called the

Securitate as a dedication to the communist party to control the economic center, monopolize the media, and direct the armed forces. Romania's conditions in 1989 are described in the novel, as quoted below.

Conditions are deplorable in Romania.

Nicolae Ceaușescu. Leader with an iron fist. Megalomaniac.

The worst human suffering in the Eastern Bloc. Romanian civilians consist of smart, attractive, and friendly people but are prohibited from interacting with foreigners. Imagine a psychiatric hospital where the patients are made leaders. Meanwhile, the officers were punished for thinking sanely.

Avoid Romania. Visit Hungary or Bulgaria, where conditions are better.

(Sepetys, 2022: 6-7)

This condition shows that authorities entirely control Romanian civilians' lives. Romanian civilians cannot even think and act freely. Likewise, their mindsets, electricity usage, food, and others are regulated. Thus, to dismantle these problems, this study uses Giorgio Agamben's concepts to explore how Ceaușescu, as a state leader, was able to subdue Romanian civil, obey it, control adults down to small children, and make fellow individuals not trust each other, including their own family.

There are three concepts that this study uses, namely *nuda vita*, state of exception, and sovereign power. Agamben (2020: 114) says that *nuda vita* can stay and get out of the political order when the boundaries of *nuda vita* have started to fade. The difference between humans and animals "others" is significant for Agamben (2020: 7) because it leads to humans' idea of not only sustaining their relationship but also determining or naturalizing some anthropological qualities as innate, covering up the power relations that are inherent in their continuity (Murray, 2010: 94).

For Agamben, the anthropological definition of *homo sapiens* is an instrument to generate human recognition (Agamben, 2004: 26). This instrument simultaneously as things that are not contradictory, but governed by the same logic, trying to define everything concerning; exclude and include, translating which is; human and inhuman, human and animal (Murray, 2010: 95). This binary opposition between human and animal life produces a third life form, *nuda vita*,

which makes *homo sapiens* unstable (Murray, 2010: 95). Agamben in Murray (2010: 95) proposes to reject *nuda vita* which will represent a dialectical synthesis.

Agamben in Murray (2010: 122) claims that the *zoē* category of life is not excluded from the classical sphere of *bios* politics. The claims against the sovereign's exception—sovereign or king—can be seen in ways that it is always possible to remove the figure of "sovereign" from the political field. Still, the sovereign is not subject to the same laws and regulations as its civilians. This exception works in another way from the political order, in which civilians can be expelled from the city, taking away their political rights; thus, it is no longer illegal for them to be killed (Murray, 2010: 122). This figure is referred to as a *homo sacer* in the political paradigm. Hence, the state of exception is a zone where law and life cannot be distinguished (Agamben, 2020: 103) and where authorities can most easily make absolute decisions (Agamben, 2020: 259). The sovereign causes everyone to have the potential to become *hominies sacred* (Agamben, 1998: 84, 2020: 110).

This study used a descriptive qualitative method. In this study, there are a formal object and a material object. The formal object uses Giorgio Agamben's theory regarding sovereign power, *nuda vita*, and the state of exception. Meanwhile, the material object used is the historical novel *I Must Betray You* by Ruta Sepetys (2022). This interesting study is based on the material object aspect of the historical novel because history is always written by winners (Murray, 2010: 86). According to Agamben in Murray (2010: 87), the role of history is to reveal the state of an immanent perfection and make it absolute for this reason it can be seen and dominant in the present. Whereas formal historicism seeks to reveal the past to recover historical records more accurately, not to understand the structure of history, the structures contained in the apparatus of power are often covered by historical narratives (Murray, 2010: 88). The data collection technique utilized the first reading to give a general analysis overview. The second reading is in-depth regarding the series of events, the character's life, and the conditions in the storyline. Afterward, the relationship between data and theory is analyzed. The relationship is functional, intentional, and others (Faruk, 2012: 25). The final part of the analysis is the conclusion. This study uses some previous studies to track the novelty.

There is a similar previous study with the material object, *I Must Betray You*. Mihailescu (2022) uses Lacan's theory with imaginary, symbolic, and real concepts and Bohn's quantum theory to analyze *I Must Betray You*. Her study shows that a listening device is "a word" trapped in the body and mind, subconsciously giving rise to fear. Thus, it gives rise to symptoms such as helplessness, deep sadness, hopelessness, humiliation, and total hopelessness. Meanwhile, three previous studies used Giorgio Agamben as the formal object.

The study conducted by He (2022) discusses the biopolitics of women's bodies in China and the relationship between public and private interests in the novel Mo Yan's *Frog* and Zola's *Fruitfulness*. He (2022: 55) explores how the conflict between government intervention and individual institutions, and between private and public spheres, aims to describe how contemporary Chinese rural literature responds and interacts with Western literary traditions prioritizing individualism and its traditions. He (2022: 55) uses Agamben and Foucault's biopolitical theory.

Thus, the results of this study show the mechanism of biopolitics subjecting individuals to obedience to national interests (He, 2022: 55). In the first novel, Mo Yan's *Frog*, from contemporary Chinese literature, shows the sacrifice of individual rights and freedoms for the common good which leads to the objectification and politicization of the female body, and the collective guilt of policy, resistance to collectivism represented by Wang Dan (He, 2022: 61). Meanwhile, in the second novel, Emile Zola's *Fruitfulness*, from the Western literary tradition, shows extreme individualism which results in selfishness, social alienation, and guilt in individuals (He, 2022: 65-66).

Burke (2019) researched the camp paradigm and dementia as a way of thinking beyond bare life concept of the Holocaust. By implication, Burke's research (2019: 195) associates her symbolic relationship between "long-term geriatric wards" and "death camps". In that connection, some people have dementia, like sentenced camp prisoners. The occurrence is also described as a contemptible expression of the logic of death (Burke, 2019: 200). In addition, Burke (2019: 195) also explores the camp paradigm as an explanatory concept through the definition of camps as modern *nomos* (Agamben, 2020: 37). Thus, this study uses Giorgio

Agamben's theory on the concept of biopolitics. The results show that dementia has the potential as a locus for transformative ideas regarding care, non-instrumentalist conceptions, and a community of human values.

The research conducted by Özpolat (2017) considering the fact that special forms of dying and killing are mostly seen in a shadowy zone or blurred boundary between life and death, I shall attempt to find a compromise between Michel Foucault (biopolitics discusses the case of euthanasia in the biopolitical context proposed by Agamben and Foucault to understand the complexity of juridical-Merico-politics. This study used the biopolitical theory of Foucault and Agamben. Özpolat's research (2017: 28) considering the fact that special forms of dying and killing are mostly seen in a shadowy zone or blurred boundary between life and death, I shall attempt to find a compromise between Michel Foucault (biopolitics shows the problematic relationship between power and death. The meaning of death in the biopolitical context proposed by Foucault is empty and shows that a life that is not worth living succeeds in completing what has been lost. Euthanasia, as a political phenomenon, marks the indistinction zone as a meeting place for the powers of life and death. Euthanasia is an example of a modern biopolitical dispositive, the separation between "taking life" and "letting die" has no difference in meaning.

Based on previous researches, this study has differences in studying Giorgio Agamben's theory regarding the sovereign power, *nuda vita*, and the state of exception, which uses the material object *I Must Betray You* by Ruta Sepetys. The novelty lies in the operation of different Agamben concepts employed as perspectives on *nuda vita* and the sovereign power in this study. It can be seen in how Ruta Sepetys represents a sovereign power that restrained Romanian civilians' lives and how Romanian civilians detached from *nuda vita* and the sovereign power in Ruta Sepetys's *I Must Betray You*.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### The Sovereign Power Restrains Romanian Civilians' Lives

A life that is not protected from death is a bare life or *nuda vita*, an element of original politics (Agamben, 2020: 140). It is similar to Romanian civilians' life

in 1989 during the reign of Nicolae Ceaușescu. As the sovereign power, he made Romanian civilians as though *homo sacer* without exception. Romanian civilians "follow and believe" in every authority created by Ceaușescu. This occurrence reflects that the decision of the sovereign authority is a purely absolute decision.

Thus, the sovereign power acts as someone who determines whether a country's situation is effective or not, and the sovereign will continue to create and guarantee the continuation of that situation as a whole in its totality (Agamben, 2020: 30-31). Schmitt views the sovereign power as a "political will" capable of making fundamental concrete decisions on the character and form of political existence (Agamben, 2020: 75). On the other hand, Sieves in Agamben (2020: 75) sees the occurrence as a criterion that makes it unclear or indistinguishable whether power equated with the individual benefit or nation benefit to constitute a constitution. As depicted in the novel *I Must Betray You*.

In Romania, we always follow orders. We are often ordered. We were ordered to be brothers united in communism. We call each other 'Comrades' to reinforce the impression that we are all equal; there is no limit to social class. The good people in communism always obey the rules. Despite keeping secrets, like my interest in poetry and philosophy, I pretended to obey.

(Sepetys, 2022: 2-3)

It explains how the Romanian civilians were implanted with an ideology of being a good communist; they must obey all the regulations ordered by a sovereign. The impression created by Ceaușescu was equality. This impression assesses the absence of social class in Romanian civilians. However, this impression serves a purpose only to expand Ceaușescu's power. When the Romanian civilians "accept and obey" all the orders created by Ceaușescu, then Romanian civilians' life step by step change and evolve into bare life or *nuda vita*, then it makes the sovereign power more authoritarian. The authoritarian attitude of the sovereign is shown through "must obey the rules". Furthermore, to perpetuate his power, the sovereign creates prohibitions. As in the novel *I Must Betray You*.

...Lyrics of a song I heard illegally on Voice of America's radio broadcast. Yes, illegal. Many things are illegal in Romania—including my

thoughts and notebooks. Nicolae Ceaușescu. Our beloved leader. Our hero. The eccentric leader of the Romanian Communist Party, the vampire who sucks the blood of millions; these words were, of course, forbidden. A song lyricist is put in a psychiatric hospital because it contains negative meanings about life in Romania. Such as, a student was put in jail because he was found to have a typewriter. Criticize loudly, will be arrested as a 'political deserter'.

(Sepetys, 2022: 2-6)

The above quote not only shows the regulations made by Ceaușescu to perpetuate the power of his Communist Party but also extends his power to the level of manipulating Romanian civilians' actions. For instance, Romanian civilians were not allowed to listen to songs from foreign countries, have a radio, typewriter, notebooks, and talk that contained negative criticism about the sovereign or regime system, interact with Americans and British, and even gather fellow Romanians, that all an illegal act in 1989, like in this narrative, in Romania, it is against the law to gather more than a few people (Sepetys, 2022: 182).

Therefore, Romanian civilians have Voice of America radio secretly. Notebooks containing criticism must be kept safely. It may not be known to anyone to remain safe, which can result in punishment. Any action that leads to prohibitions will be considered a "political deserter", and anyone caught violating will be jailed. Ceaușescu's power developed and entered the daily lives of Romanian civilians. Ceaușescu implemented a monitoring system done by the Securitate and created slogans that all Romanians had to obey, such as "Communist Party having the right to witness anything, anytime, anywhere. Everything belongs to the Party, and the Party belongs to the family of its sovereign, Ceaușescu" (Sepetys, 2022: 7). Thus, the sovereign power has the right to Romanian civilians' private lives.

Agamben (1998: 115) expresses this condition as a characteristic of sovereign power because it places biological life at the calculation's center. It causes a state to show only secret ties in uniting *nuda vita* and the sovereign power. Thus, *nuda vita* becomes the characteristic of sovereign power. To launch his action, Ceaușescu created a regime system to operate the *nuda vita* of Romanian civilians by recruiting the informant. The requirement to become an informant

must fit the political order classification, which Agamben calls *bios* (Agamben, 2020), in *I Must Betray You* illustrated as follows.

Agent. Informant. Mouse. Our country is full of it all. We are seriously infected. Moreover, the numbers keep doubling. They are on the streets and at school, crawling at work, nibbling on walls... and into our homes. The misery here—it is not just physically assaulting. But our mental too. Mess up our minds. They do this to many people.

(Sepetys, 2022: 190 & 193)

The Securitate exercises oversight over Romanian civilians to ensure compliance with the directives established by Ceaușescu. Within Romania, the Securitate wields more power than the military, possessing the capacity to wield significant influence, intensify surveillance on families, hinder prospects for university admission, and inflict even graver consequences. If the Romanian civilians intended to rebel or fight against Ceaușescu, the Securitate would destroy whoever it was. The power possessed by the Securitate as a *bios* subject exceeds the power possessed by the military, even though they both come from *bios* subjects; this is because the Securitate is like Ceaușescu's accomplice. In addition, the role of the Securitate is to recruit Romanian civilians to become informants or lackeys of the Securitate.

It was related to news written by McLaughlin (2006) in communist-era archives that the recruited agents or informants were children to spy on their parents, school friends, and teachers. If the children did not want to, the Securitate blackmailed the children into becoming their informants under the Ceaușescu regime. Lonescu in McLaughlin (2006) also said that in every region, there is a complex network of these children, aged between 12 and 14 years.

Agamben (2020: 20) calls this as exclusive inclusion between *zoē* and *bios* entering the zone of indistinction. Each resident will inform other residents to Securitate. Thus, fellow Romanian civilians are always on guard against one another, always guarding their attitudes, words and actions, and feel fear every day. This occasion gave rise to a lack of trust between someone to another in Romania. Therefore, individuality is always intertwined, and the divisions between Romanian civilians always last. The condition of life described by Ruta Sepetys in *I Must*

*Betray You* is a *nuda vita* phenomenon, as stated by Agamben (2020: 143) that bare life is not political *bios* and natural *zoē* but a zone of indistinction where *zoē* and *bios* constitute one another by mutual inclusion and exclusion. In addition, the living of Romanian conditions in 1989 experienced limited electronic equipment, which is described as follows.

Streetlights in Bucharest do not work because they are too expensive. Romania is rich in resources, but our “heroes” have been exporting these resources for several years to pay off the country’s debt. So, our electricity and food were rationed.

(Sepetys, 2022: 10)

Based on the quote above, Ceaușescu created the conditions for Romanian civilians to live under limitations. He applies the most plausible excuse—for entering Romanian civilians to *nuda vita*—by stating that the country has a debt to limit everything. Electricity lines, such as lights, will be turned off at hours unknown to civilians; in the novel, there is no definite schedule regarding the flow of electricity. No notice could make us make preparations (Sepetys, 2022: 66). On the other hand, Romania has only one T.V. channel and one T.V. brand. The government only showed monotonous shows for two hours daily, most of which were propaganda and tributes to Ceaușescu (Sepetys, 2022: 23). Restricting T.V. channels is a form of propaganda by the authorities’ showing tributes to Ceaușescu. Analogous to it, *nuda vita* is a source of unmitigated fear or despair, a condition whose cultural readability is routinely mediated in mode a barbaric as ongoing horror shows populated by monsters and zombies (Basting, 2009; Behuniak, 2011; Chivers, 2011; Cohen-Shalev & E.L, 2013; Herskovits, 1995; Wearing, 2013). In addition, the living conditions of Romanian civilians regarding the economy and health described in *I Must Betray You* are as follows.

No red meat, we are advised to eat sea fish. But fresh fish is unavailable, only fish bones to make thin soup. Can that be considered fish consumption? We need *Kent* for many reasons. *Kent* is a brand of Western cigarettes. *Kent* was used as a medium of exchange, bribe, and barter. We have the *lei*, the Romanian currency, but what to do if there is nothing to buy in the shops with *lei*. There was one time I didn’t give

*Kent* when I went to have my teeth extracted. The doctor didn’t use any anesthetic, instead he pressed his knee against my chest, drilling and pulling my teeth out. The hole in my gum got infected and my face was swollen for a month. Meanwhile, I’m still mentally traumatized until now. The dentist is obligated to bribe *Kent*.

(Sepetys, 2022: 23 & 27)

Based on the above narrative, Ceaușescu also limited Romanian civilians’ food resources and health. Food is not only rationed like pets, as Agamben (2020: 20) stated that *nuda vita* is a life that cannot be distinguished between human and animal life but also Ceaușescu made Romanian civilians’ lives under sub animal level. They were ordered to queue for food at certain hours but did not know the exact time. When they queued, they found expired food, whether healthy or sick, just like the Florescu family who found a can of peanuts that had been dusty and expired two years ago, more specifically, beans that had gone bad.

They patiently queued up, accustomed to the wait, like a scene from a novel. They pondered how long people in other countries endure such lines. They realized that neither age nor illness could exempt them from this obligation. They obediently stood there, uncertain about the store’s inventory. Eventually, after enduring three long hours in line, Florescu’s father returned home exhausted. He carried a battered and dusty can of peanuts, its expiration date indicating the year 1987. Florescu’s father does not say anything, Florescu’s father is silent when he is angry. He felt unable to do anything and he hated it. “You realize how crazy this condition is? They have brainwashed us, made us queue for hours and made us grateful to get beans that are already rotting,” said Bunu (Sepetys, 2022: 71-73). Despite this, they remained silent, and neither dared to speak, let alone get angry. Such living conditions are no longer considered human, even animal life.

In addition, something very ironic is that when Ceaușescu advised the Romanian civilians to eat fresh meat, but he did not provide it, the people used fish bones to make fish soup. For medical treatment or buying goods, Romanian civilians cannot use Romanian currency; the currency is only for decoration because what applies there are only barter tools such as *Kent* cigarettes. Suppose the Romanians do not use *Kent*

as a medium of exchange when seeking treatment. In that case, certain parties will not handle it, or they handle it in the most abusive way, namely, not using an anesthetic.

This impacts the health of Romanian civilians as the news written by Davis (2020) reveals the suffering of Romanian civilians after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, which resulted in malnutrition, having little social contact, and not receiving adequate care. Ceaușescu's policies prohibiting abortion and contraception resulted in children ending up in orphanages and living in dire conditions. Apart from that, the long-term impact faced by Romanian civilians was revealed by Mackes et al. (2020) that they experienced cognitive difficulties when they were children, while when they were adults, the level of nervous and mental disorders was higher, giving rise to high levels of anxiety and depression.

On the other hand, Ceaușescu also interfered in the residences and worship of Romanian civilians. He had destroyed over thirty thousand residences, churches, and schools, then built "People's Housing" unfit for habitation. The conditions in which the Romanians lived in 1989 were like cement-coated cupboard drawers with piles of stationery. That is, they live crammed into flats. Not only with the crowds but with the smells, the crying, the bugging devices—no privacy. A life that is not worthy of being called a life successfully created by Ceaușescu, as described in *I Must Betray You*.

Ceaușescu decided to demolish the city and built 'Public Housing'—flat houses with cement walls. The beloved regime has destroyed churches, schools, and over thirty thousand homes, including Bunu's. Each family, like us, which has five members, is herded to live in flats with a narrow room. Some have not yet been built; no lift, door, or staircase exists. The same concrete buildings were built all over town, with cement steps leading nowhere.

(Sepetys, 2022: 17-18)

The living conditions of the Romanian civilians in the narrative above are described as being like a prison. They were forced to live in flats built by Ceaușescu after he tore it down and took over the land of Romanian civilians. The flat is included in the category of not being considered a house because the building is described as like a prison that is always

under surveillance. Not only is the condition of the building described as a prison: the stairs smell of oil, the sounds of unpleasant or environmentally friendly sounds, the cries of hungry babies, the screams of drunken men, toilets, and coughing sounds. Every voice can be heard from each other between one house and another in the same building, there is no privacy, and it is like living in a prison. as described in *I Must Betray You*.

Living in a flat is like living in a cement-coated cupboard drawer. Each floor is filled with the same number of rooms and is filled with each family. I stepped along the stairs, smelled kerosene and heard unpleasant things. On the first floor, the sound of a hungry baby crying. On the second floor, a drunken husband screams at his wife. On the third floor, the sound of a toilet flushing. On the fourth floor, an older man with leukemia coughs. The residents believe that the building supervisor always reports to Securitate, and this place has no privacy. The Party must know everything; everything belongs to the Party. There is Phillips outside and inside the house. Phillips is a listening device that is said to be scattered in many places: inside walls, telephones and ashtrays. Being under the threat of close surveillance has put us under a lot of stress: depressed, anxious, restless, horrified. "Gabriel and Mioara are sleeping in the room. Cicilia had a sewing schedule, so she slept on the folding couch. I sleep in the kitchen".

(Sepetys, 2022: 23-25)

This condition in the zone of indistinction between residence and prison for Romanian civilians was formed by Ceaușescu. In addition, every Romanian citizen believes that building supervisors will always report anything that happens there. In every house, informants will report to the Securitate, including the regime installing soundproofing devices in every house. Romanian civilians are under surveillance wherever they are, like prisoners. Their lives have been included in *nuda vita* because *bios* (Securitate) and *zoē* (informants) are widespread in the lives of Romanian civilians, so there is confusion, and it is difficult to distinguish between ordinary Romanian civilians and Romanian informants. Thus, the emergence of anxiety in every individual in Romania

makes Romanian civilians weak. This incident later became Ceaușescu's strength to establish every activity in a state of exception (Agamben, 2020) to perpetuate *nuda vita*.

### The Romanian Civilians Detached from *Nuda Vita* and The Sovereign Power

**Heaven:** If communism is heaven, why are we given fences, walls, and a rule of law so no one can escape?

(Sepetys, 2022: 138)

After all this time, the Romanian civilians felt extreme rule, pressure, and fear, and Romanian civilians' awareness of *nuda vita*, which has been lived for a long time in many years, has finally emerged. This awareness arises from unspoken contemplations that only nest in the heads of every Romanian civilian, as the quote above shows an expression of awareness of Ceaușescu's communist regime. If the sovereign is right about rules that apply to the whole of Cilivian, why are Romanian civilians given barriers, so they do not flee to other countries? The same is also found in the quotation below.

"Bunu, if not many people know about Romania, how will they know we need help?"

"Romanians who live outside this country—the diaspora and political prisoners—they are on our side and will spread the news," said Bunu confidently. Nadia Comănești has arrived in America. One of the most famous figures in Romania has no access to a passport, no privacy, and no freedom whatsoever. She was considered property belonging to Romania. Nadia, who has captured the world's attention, angers the First Lady, Elena. If Romanian celebrities live in misery, will the whole world finally understand how bad things are for the common people in Romania?

(Sepetys, 2022: 128 & 137)

Nadia Comănești, a renowned figure from Romania, sought asylum in the United States. Her escape garnered widespread international attention. In Romania, she lacked a passport, personal privacy, or individual freedom, as she was regarded as state property and subjected to harsh treatment. This treatment of a celebrity raises concerns about the

treatment of ordinary Romanian citizens. Comănești's decisions not only drew the gaze of foreign nations but also raised awareness among the Romanian populace.

This possibility is not only found in the novel but also in the news in 1989 written by Howard (2023) that Nadia Comănești, who was a Romanian hero because of her achievements in the world of gymnastics, won gold medals six times in a row, causing World attention. However, Nadia decided to flee to America in 1989 because she could no longer stand the rules of the Ceaușescu regime that had been in place since 1985, which did not allow Nadia, as the Romanian Sports Ambassador, to travel abroad. Her escape to America caught the world's attention, so this possibility became one of the things that helped Romanian civilians escape *nuda vita* during the Ceaușescu regime.

In addition, the Securitate, which targets and terrorizes its civilians by turning every civilian member into an informant, is then used again by the civilian to become a double agent. That is a way to escape from *nuda vita*, carried out by Romanian civilians. For instance, Florescu was pressured, threatened, and then used as an informant to spy on American diplomats by befriending his son, Mr. Van Dorn. However, Florescu's resistance was to secretly dig up information about the Securitate. As Florescu assumes his role as an informant, he surreptitiously reads the notebook of Dan—the son of a diplomat—and discovers something that shocks him.

Amnesty International reports on human rights violations. The people were fed propaganda and kept away from information by Ceaușescu and his wife (third-grade graduate, elementary school). An American ambassador resigned because Washington did not believe reports that Ceaușescu had deceived America.

(Sepetys, 2022: 44)

From Dan's notebook, he discovers something that even the Romanians did not know about. Among them human rights violations, being kept away from information about Ceaușescu's real life, and Ceaușescu deceiving America. Florescu wanted to dig deeper into Ceaușescu's life. As contained in the narrative below.

Ceaușescu has not only deceived Americans, but he has also deceived everyone. They thought he was a righteous dictator. Ceaușescu and his



family were free to travel to every continent and enjoy everything the world had to offer, but he locked his people in the confines of the state to work in fear and terrorized them if they wanted passports. People who register for emigration are often subject to punishment. Severe punishment.

(Sepetys, 2022: 101 & 107)

Romanian civilians had lived in misery all this time to make Ceaușescu live more prosperous, powerful, and more than all, Romanian civilians were locked up and not given access to get out of Romania; even people who forced themselves to register emigration were subject to sanctions, while Ceaușescu lived freely traveling the world. It was related to news written by Rosca (2014) wrote that at that time Ceaușescu and the Securitate did the dirty work of torturing and killing thousands of political opponents during his 24 years in power and succeeded in carrying out billions of dollars in fraud, bribery, and other commercial criminal machinations.

Based on Agamben's theory, it is called the sovereign paradox, in which the sovereign power is outside and within the law itself (Agamben, 2020: 29). The sovereign power made the regulations but did not implement them. When Ceaușescu created the prohibition against leaving Romania, on the contrary, he left Romania and traveled around the world. In addition, Romanian civilians were put in a state of exception to expand Ceaușescu's power. In the state of exception, the most innocent actions or the most trivial events can lead to the most severe consequences (Agamben, 2020: 93). For instance, "think" can make an individual punished for making endless negotiations common (Agamben, 2020: 94). Camps are absolute places of exception (Agamben, 2020: 37). Romania during Ceaușescu's reign was not a country, but a reflection of the camp in Giorgio Agamben's concept. That is because life is pure bare life in that space, completely exploited by humans (Agamben, 2020: 251).

Thus, this research offers a solution to get out of the shackles of the sovereign power in *nuda vita* and the state of exception by knowing as much information and knowledge as possible that Ceaușescu has prohibited. When all the information had been collected during his time as a double agent, the information was disseminated by giving notebooks

containing important information on Romanian's life secretly to an American diplomat to attract world sympathy. Like the narrative in the novel.

I filled my notebook with questions, lists and information about our country, screeching our pleas for help until I hoped Mr. Van Dorn would pass it on to the others. I made a section called Gânduri—thought—which contains contemplation (Sepetys, 2022: 138), then i will use the Wide-Handed order to my advantage. I returned to the shelf of the world's news magazine—TIME—the title was in bold and included only one word: **FREEDOM** at the American Library. I spied on Van Dorn's desk and decided where exactly to put my notebook when I was done with my chores.

(Sepetys, 2022: 140)

Apart from that, to be free from the shackles of the sovereign power in *nuda vita* and the state of exception, the most essential thing that needs to be done is civil society unity. The togetherness and unity of the entire community will undermine the regime system built for years in Romania. Like in *I Must Betray You* below.

Groups of students arrived, booing and shouting. They carry flags. A sense of solidarity began to form among the masses. Our tyrannical leader was shocked and shaken, trying to calm his people and keep giving orders. Students invite others to join in. The response was so spontaneous and fierce. Thousands of people joined the protest! Ceaușescu tried to take control. But it cannot. Voices echoed from the loudspeakers. It was December 21st. The Romanian people in Bucharest are United and ready for revolution. Romanians side by side with people in green uniforms. The army finally turned its back on the regime. The army has finally joined with the people! Ceaușescu fled in a helicopter.

(Sepetys, 2022: 203-205 & 244)

The union started to be formed by the students who were in Timișoara on Saturday and was later joined by Romanian civilians. This action then spread not only to Timișoara but also to Bucharest when Ceaușescu was giving a speech. Initially, the Romanian civilians in Bucharest welcomed the speeches with

great enthusiasm. Suddenly, students and civilians from other cities arrived, and the masses protested the persecution of Ceaușescu and the regime system. On December 21, 1989, Romanian civilians united to overthrow Ceaușescu, the Securitate, and those working for them. Then this mass action expanded, and a sense of solidarity became one unit.

Sima's study (2017) mentions it as "People's Power" to achieve democracy so that Romanian civilians must join the army. The army's role was needed to carry out this action because Ceaușescu used the Securitate and snipers to kill the Romanian civilians. Freedom would have been impossible without soldiers because Ceaușescu's side used weapons while civilians only used their voices. Thus, the army's assistance with its military equipment made this action successful. Graham-Harrison (2014) and Walker (2019) also said that this incident made Ceaușescu and his wife run towards the roof where there was a helicopter.

At 05:00 in the afternoon, Ceaușescu and his family were arrested. A special message from the long-exiled Romanian king was also broadcast. King Michael expressed his admiration in writing and thanked the Romanian people for fighting for our freedom. French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas promised humanitarian assistance.

(Sepetys, 2022: 257)

The union between all Romanian civilians and the army captured Ceaușescu also overthrew Ceaușescu, his family and his followers. This unity then became a way out against Ceaușescu, who in Agamben called him the sovereign power (Agamben, 2020: 29) who ensnared civilians in a *nuda vita*, and a state of exception based only on decisions (Agamben, 2020: 30) and normalization (Agamben, 1995: 19) carried out against civilians.

## CONCLUSION

This study can be concluded that Ruta Sepetys deliberately wrote *I Must Betray You*, which has similarities with socio-historical juncture regarding the feelings and conditions of Romanian civilian residents during Ceaușescu's communist regime, which was published in 2022. It is because she wanted to reconstruct the painful incidents. It was to be used

as a lesson and awareness. How the third life or *nuda vita* and terrible authoritarian power significantly exist in Romania while providing solutions and innovations to get out of this shackled power. Thus, this study is substantial, which has never been studied by previous researchers regarding Romania.

## COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

The researchers indicate that this article is free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, editorial process, and publication process in general.

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