



## The Politics of Waiting: Subalternity, Marginalisation, and Failed Resistance in Laszlo Krasznahorkai's Satantango

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### Abstract

Laszlo Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* presents a marginalised rural community whose inhabitants exist within conditions of poverty, isolation, uncertainty, and social disintegration. This paper examines waiting as a political condition through which subalternity and failed resistance are produced and sustained. Rather than treating waiting merely as a psychological state or a feature of narrative temporality, the study argues that waiting in *Satantango* reflects an unequal distribution of agency: while some characters possess mobility, information, and access to institutional power, others are compelled to wait for change to arrive from outside themselves. Drawing on Ranajit Guha's *Subaltern Studies* and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of subalternity, representation, and agency, the paper examines the inhabitants of the unnamed settlement as marginalised subjects whose desires and voices do not readily develop into collective political action. Marxist perspectives are employed to connect their marginalisation with material deprivation, economic insecurity, labour, and unequal power relations. Particular attention is given to the decaying settlement as a marginal space, the villagers' expectation of Irímias, and the transformation of their desire for liberation into dependence. Irímias's return exposes the vulnerability of a community whose hopes have become attached to an external figure promising renewal. The paper argues that the failure of resistance in *Satantango* does not arise from an absence of dissatisfaction but from the fragmentation of agency under conditions of material and social marginalisation. Waiting consequently becomes a mechanism through which hope, dependence, and power intersect. Krasznahorkai's novel ultimately demonstrates that the desire to escape oppression does not automatically generate liberation; without collective agency, material autonomy, and the ability to challenge structures of power, resistance remains vulnerable to manipulation and failure.

**Keywords:** Politics of Waiting; Subaltern Temporality; Abandoned Spaces; Failed Resistance; Marginal Apocalypse; Deferred Agency; Social Marginality; Manipulation of Hope; Subaltern Voice; Temporal Stagnation; Power and Representation; Krasznahorkai Studies.



### Introduction

Laszlo Krasznahorkai's *Satantango*, originally published in Hungarian in 1985 and translated into English by George Szirtes in 2012, constructs a bleak social world in which a small group of inhabitants remains trapped within a deteriorating rural settlement. The novel is concerned with people who have been socially and economically displaced and whose lives are marked by uncertainty, isolation, dependency, and frustrated expectations. The settlement is not simply a geographical location but a space in which marginalisation becomes visible. Its physical deterioration reflects the social and economic deterioration experienced by its inhabitants. The characters desire movement and transformation, yet their ability to determine the direction of their lives remains severely limited. This tension between the desire for change and the inability to produce change independently makes *Satantango* particularly productive for an examination of subalternity and failed resistance.

The novel's opening establishes waiting as a fundamental condition of existence. Its epigraph, "In that case, I'll miss the thing by waiting for it," taken from Kafka's *The Castle*, immediately establishes a paradox in which waiting simultaneously expresses expectation and the possibility of missing what is expected. This paradox becomes central to Krasznahorkai's representation of the villagers. They wait for something that might transform their lives, yet their waiting does not necessarily bring them closer to freedom. Instead, it repeatedly places them in relationships of dependence. The significance of waiting therefore extends beyond time. It becomes a question of power: who has the ability to act, and who is forced to wait for another person to act? This distinction provides the central basis of the present study.

The concept of subalternity offers a useful framework for examining this condition. Ranajit Guha's *Subaltern Studies* challenges historical approaches that privilege elite political actors and marginalise the consciousness and actions of subordinate groups. His *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* specifically investigates the nature of peasant insurgency and attempts to recover the agency of subordinate populations. Although Guha's historical context differs fundamentally from Krasznahorkai's fictional Hungarian setting, his emphasis on subordinate agency provides a productive theoretical perspective for examining the villagers of *Satantango*. The inhabitants are not entirely passive. They possess desires, fears, suspicions, ambitions, and strategies for survival. Yet their individual responses rarely become effective collective resistance. Their marginality therefore lies not in complete silence but in the restricted capacity to transform their consciousness and dissatisfaction into sustained political action.

Spivak's intervention further complicates the relationship between marginality and agency. Her discussion of the subaltern questions whether marginalised subjects can enter structures of representation and power on their own terms. In *Satantango*, the villagers speak and act, but their speech does not necessarily translate into political authority. Their voices remain situated within a social structure that restricts their capacity to determine their own future. This distinction is particularly important because the novel does not simply portray powerless individuals who have no desires. On the contrary, the villagers possess a strong desire for change. Their tragedy is that

their desire is repeatedly mediated by people and structures that possess greater power than they do.

A Marxist reading complements this Subaltern Studies approach by drawing attention to the material foundations of marginalisation. The inhabitants of Satantango occupy an economically insecure environment in which labour, property, resources, and social status are unevenly distributed. Their material circumstances restrict their capacity to act independently. Their dependence on external possibilities is therefore not simply psychological. It is rooted in the socioeconomic conditions surrounding them. The political significance of waiting emerges from this material vulnerability: those who lack resources must often depend upon those who possess them. In this sense, the villagers' waiting becomes a consequence of their marginal economic position as well as a mechanism that reproduces their dependence.

### **Objectives and Research Gap**

This study aims to examine the politics of waiting in László Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* by analysing the relationship among subalternity, marginalisation, material deprivation, and failed resistance; to investigate how the abandoned rural settlement functions as a spatial representation of social and economic exclusion; to explore the ways in which the villagers' hopes and expectations create conditions of dependence; to analyse Irímias as a figure through whom the desire for liberation becomes vulnerable to manipulation; and to demonstrate, through Subaltern Studies and Marxist perspectives, that the failure of resistance in the novel results not from the absence of consciousness or dissatisfaction but from fragmented agency, economic insecurity, lack of solidarity, and unequal access to power. While existing critical discussions of *Satantango* have examined its apocalyptic atmosphere, circular structure, philosophical dimensions, social decay, and the significance of waiting, this study approaches waiting specifically as a political relationship between agency and dependence. The focus is therefore not simply on the fact that the characters wait, but on the structures that make them wait and on the ways in which their waiting contributes to the reproduction of marginality.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Guha's understanding of subaltern insurgency provides the first major theoretical foundation for this study. His work challenges interpretations of subordinate populations that reduce their actions to irrationality, criminality, or spontaneous disturbance. Instead, Guha examines the consciousness underlying subordinate resistance. This perspective is useful for *Satantango* because the villagers cannot be adequately understood as passive victims. Their individual actions reveal an awareness of their circumstances and a desire for alternatives. They recognise their economic and social insecurity, imagine escape, distrust those around them, and attempt to secure their own interests. However, their awareness remains fragmented. The community lacks the solidarity necessary to transform individual dissatisfaction into collective resistance. Krasznahorkai therefore presents a form of subaltern existence in which consciousness survives but effective collective agency remains unstable.

Spivak's theory makes this question more complex by distinguishing between the existence of a marginalised subject and the subject's ability to participate effectively in structures of representation and power. Her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is concerned with the difficulties involved in representing those positioned outside dominant structures. Applied cautiously to Satantango, this framework helps explain why the villagers' voices do not automatically result in political transformation. They speak, desire, complain, dream, and act, but their actions remain constrained by structures they do not control. The novel therefore resists the simplistic assumption that giving marginalised characters a voice is equivalent to giving them power.

The Marxist dimension of the study focuses on the relationship between material conditions and agency. The villagers' social marginalisation is inseparable from their economic vulnerability. Their deteriorating environment is symptomatic of a larger collapse of social and material security. In such circumstances, individual freedom becomes difficult to sustain because economic dependence restricts political independence. The inhabitants' vulnerability to Irímias can therefore be interpreted through the relationship between material deprivation and ideological dependence. Their belief in his promises emerges from their need for an alternative to their existing conditions.

### **The Abandoned Settlement and the Production of Marginality**

The rural settlement in Satantango is fundamental to the novel's representation of marginalisation. The characters inhabit a place that appears to have been abandoned by the larger social order. The landscape is dominated by rain, mud, deteriorating buildings, and physical isolation. The opening itself establishes the oppressive environment through Futaki's awakening to the sound of bells and the approaching autumn rains. A description of the landscape refers to "the cracked and saline soil" and the "stinking yellow sea of mud" that makes movement increasingly difficult. Such descriptions are not merely atmospheric. They establish a material world in which mobility itself becomes difficult.

The environment consequently reflects the political condition of its inhabitants. They are physically located at the margins and simultaneously positioned at the margins of economic and political power. Their isolation reduces their access to alternatives and intensifies their dependence upon information and assistance from outside. The settlement becomes a spatial manifestation of subalternity because the people within it have little control over the conditions that shape their existence.

The importance of space becomes clearer when the villagers imagine leaving. Escape appears repeatedly as an attractive possibility, but the possibility of leaving does not automatically produce freedom. Movement requires resources, information, and direction. The villagers possess limited access to all three. Consequently, the physical deterioration of the settlement corresponds to a narrowing of political possibilities. Their world becomes a closed environment in which waiting appears easier than action.

The relationship between space and marginality is therefore central to Krasznahorkai's political vision. The villagers are not merely individuals who happen to live in an unpleasant location; their location contributes directly to their social vulnerability. The settlement isolates them from

alternative forms of collective organisation and makes external figures more powerful. When Irimias returns, he enters a community already prepared to invest hope in someone who appears capable of providing the movement they cannot create themselves.

### **Waiting, Dependence, and Subaltern Existence**

Waiting in Satantango is fundamentally connected with the villagers' inability to control their future. One of the clearest descriptions of their condition presents them as people who “are waiting” and compares them to servants who do not know what to do after the master has disappeared. The image is politically significant because it associates waiting with dependency. The villagers are not simply waiting for an event; they are waiting because the disappearance of authority has left them without direction. This condition is particularly revealing when considered through a Marxist framework. The collapse of an economic and social structure does not automatically produce emancipation. When a previous structure disappears, those who have been subordinated may lack the resources necessary to construct an alternative. The result can be uncertainty rather than freedom. The villagers' experience illustrates this contradiction. They are apparently free from one form of authority, yet they do not possess sufficient collective agency to determine what comes next.

The novel therefore complicates the idea of liberation. Freedom cannot be reduced to the disappearance of an old authority. It requires the capacity to establish a new form of autonomous social existence. The villagers lack this capacity. Their waiting consequently becomes a form of suspended agency.

The epigraph's paradox becomes increasingly significant in this context. “In that case, I'll miss the thing by waiting for it” suggests that waiting can prevent the very event for which one waits. The villagers' situation operates according to a similar logic. Their expectation of transformation postpones autonomous action. They wait for someone or something to change their circumstances, and this dependence prevents them from becoming the agents of that transformation themselves.

### **Irimias and the Manipulation of Hope**

Irimias occupies the crucial position of an external figure upon whom the villagers project their expectations. His return creates the possibility of renewal, escape, and social transformation. The community has been waiting for something to happen, and his arrival appears to provide precisely the event they have anticipated. The political importance of Irimias lies in his ability to transform hope into dependence. He does not create the villagers' desire for change; that desire already exists because of their marginal conditions. Instead, he enters an environment in which people are already searching for a figure who can give direction to their uncertainty. This makes his authority possible. The novel repeatedly presents Irimias in ambiguous terms. For different characters he appears as a criminal, saviour, manipulator, or almost messianic figure. Critical discussion of the novel similarly emphasises its concern with people's reactions to promises of “hope and salvation.” This ambiguity

is essential because it demonstrates that political authority does not always operate through direct coercion. It can operate through promises.

The villagers' belief in Irimias is therefore connected with their subaltern position. Because they lack meaningful alternatives, they become receptive to his promises. Their hope becomes a resource that can be politically managed. This relationship between hope and power is central to the politics of waiting. The villagers believe that Irimias can provide movement because they themselves cannot produce it. He therefore occupies the position of the actor while they occupy the position of those who wait for his instructions. The difference between the two positions reveals the unequal distribution of agency within the novel.

### **Failed Resistance and Fragmented Agency**

The failure of resistance in *Satantango* cannot be explained simply by saying that the villagers are passive. Their individual actions demonstrate dissatisfaction with their circumstances, but dissatisfaction does not automatically become resistance. Effective resistance requires collective organisation, solidarity, and a shared understanding of political interests. These conditions are largely absent.

The villagers are divided by suspicion, competition, sexual relationships, economic interests, and personal ambitions. Their common material circumstances do not produce a common political identity. Instead, each individual attempts to survive within the existing conditions. Such fragmentation weakens the possibility of collective resistance. This is where Guha's concept of subordinate agency becomes especially useful. Agency does exist among the villagers, but it is unstable and fragmented. Their actions have consequences, yet they do not produce a sustained transformation of the social structure. They remain caught between individual survival and collective emancipation. The failure of resistance is therefore structural. Economic insecurity encourages competition rather than solidarity; geographical isolation restricts possibilities for organisation; lack of reliable information increases dependence; and the desire for escape makes the inhabitants susceptible to external authority. The result is a community in which resistance continually breaks down before it can become transformative.

Krasznahorkai consequently avoids presenting oppression as something imposed solely from above. The novel demonstrates how marginalisation can become reproduced through the relationships among the marginalised themselves. Distrust, competition, and dependence weaken collective agency and allow existing power relations to continue.

### **Representation, Surveillance, and the Question of Voice**

The question of who observes and represents the villagers is also significant. The Doctor's position as an observer creates another layer of distance between experience and representation. The villagers live their marginal existence, while the act of recording and interpreting their lives becomes separated from their own control.

This aspect of the novel can be connected with Spivak's concern about representation. The problem is not simply whether marginalised people speak but whether their speech can enter a structure in which it has political consequence. In *Satantango*, the villagers possess individual voices, yet they remain unable to establish control over the narratives and institutions that determine their social position. The novel's unusual narrative structure reinforces this difficulty. Perspectives shift, information is delayed, and events are encountered from different positions. The reader is repeatedly required to reconstruct what has happened. This narrative uncertainty mirrors the characters' own uncertainty about their circumstances.

The villagers therefore experience not only economic marginalisation but epistemic marginalisation: they do not always know what is happening, who possesses information, or whom they can trust. Knowledge becomes another form of power. Irímias's advantage lies partly in his ability to move between different spheres and understand the mechanisms operating beyond the villagers' immediate world. His mobility contrasts with their confinement. The contrast demonstrates that political power depends not only on material resources but also on access to information and networks.

### **The Politics of Hope**

Hope in *Satantango* is neither entirely positive nor entirely negative. It is necessary because without hope the villagers would have no reason to imagine an alternative future. Yet hope also makes them vulnerable when it becomes attached to an external authority.

This contradiction explains the political significance of waiting. Waiting requires hope, but hope without agency can become dependence. The villagers' expectation of Irímias demonstrates precisely this transformation. Their desire for a better future is genuine, but the absence of autonomous collective action allows another person to define what that future should be.

The novel therefore presents hope as politically ambivalent. It can sustain marginalised subjects, but it can also be appropriated by those who possess greater power.

This is why the novel's treatment of liberation remains deeply ironic. The inhabitants believe that leaving their present circumstances will solve their problems, but the promise of movement does not necessarily produce autonomy. They may move geographically while remaining politically dependent. The distinction between movement and liberation is consequently central to the novel. Movement is physical; liberation is political. The former does not guarantee the latter.

### **Conclusion**

Laszlo Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* offers a complex representation of marginalised existence by connecting spatial abandonment, economic insecurity, waiting, dependency, and failed resistance. The inhabitants of the rural settlement are not presented as people without consciousness or desire. They are deeply aware of their deteriorating circumstances and repeatedly imagine the possibility of another life. Nevertheless, their individual desires do not develop into effective collective resistance because the material and social conditions necessary for sustained agency are absent.



Through the framework of Subaltern Studies, the novel can be understood as a representation of subjects whose voices and desires exist within structures that limit their political effectiveness. Guha's emphasis on subordinate agency helps demonstrate that the villagers are not merely passive victims, while Spivak's concerns with representation and subaltern agency reveal why speaking and acting do not necessarily produce political power. Marxist criticism further demonstrates that their political vulnerability is inseparable from material deprivation and economic marginalisation. The central argument of this study is that waiting functions as a politics of dependence. The villagers wait because they lack the resources to determine their future independently; their waiting makes them receptive to external promises; and their dependence allows figures such as Irimias to transform hope into a mechanism of control. The epigraph's paradox "I'll miss the thing by waiting for it" therefore acquires a political significance within the novel. Waiting becomes the condition through which the anticipated future is continually postponed.

The novel's failed resistance consequently does not signify the complete absence of agency. Rather, it reveals the limitations imposed upon fragmented agency by material inequality, social distrust, geographical isolation, and dependence. Krasznahorkai shows that marginalised people may desire freedom without possessing the collective resources required to achieve it. Their failure is therefore not simply individual; it is structural.

Ultimately, *Satantango* transforms waiting from a passive temporal experience into a political condition. The inhabitants wait for change, salvation, mobility, and renewal, but their waiting repeatedly reproduces their dependence upon those who claim to possess the means of transformation. Through this relationship between waiting and power, Krasznahorkai exposes the fragile boundary between hope and manipulation. The novel suggests that genuine resistance requires more than dissatisfaction with oppression: it requires collective agency, solidarity, material autonomy, and the ability to participate meaningfully in decisions concerning the future. Without these conditions, the marginalised remain suspended between the desire for liberation and the structures that continually prevent its achievement.

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