VOICING THE SELF IN TRANSITION: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF FREEDOM AND MEMORY IN LEA YPI'S "FREE"

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https://doi.org/10.29081/INTERSTUDIA.2025.39.08

Abstract

This paper examines how Lea Ypi's *Free* (2021) constructs freedom, ideology, and identity through discourse and narrative voice. Drawing on discourse analysis, memory studies, and narrative theory, the study shows how the memoir exposes the ideological paradoxes of socialist and post-socialist Albania, highlights the role of memory and irony in reframing experience, and captures the emotional fragmentation of transition. Through double-voiced narration and shifting vocabularies of freedom, Free reveals liberty not as a fixed political condition but as a contested and continually reconstructed idea.

Key-words: *discourse, freedom, transition, memory, identity.*

Introduction

Lea Ypi's *Free* (2021) offers one of the most nuanced literary accounts of Albania's socialist past and post-socialist transition. Combining childhood recollection with adult reflection, the memoir reconstructs how political ideologies are absorbed, misunderstood, and later reinterpreted. Instead of presenting a linear movement from oppression to liberation, Free foregrounds the instability of "freedom" as both a political claim and a lived experience. This paper analyses the memoir through a discourse-analytic lens, showing how language, narrative perspective, and memory work together to reveal ideological paradoxes. Three thematic axes structure the analysis: ideological constructions of freedom, memory and double voicing, and the emotional disorientation of transition. The aim is to demonstrate how *Free* reframes "freedom" as a shifting, contested discourse rather than a stable historical truth.

1. Theoretical Background

The analysis of Lea Ypi's *Free* draws on three interrelated research traditions: discourse analysis, memory studies, and narrative theory. Together, these frameworks make it possible to understand how the memoir constructs freedom, negotiates ideological tension, and frames autobiographical memory within broader socio-political contexts. These approaches provide the conceptual foundation for the three analytical axes explored in this study: the ideological

paradoxes of freedom, the interplay of memory and double-voicing, and the narrative and emotional fragmentation characteristic of Albania's transition.

Fairclough's (1995, 2003) view of discourse as social action and social practice provides the foundation of this study. He argues that what discourse studies require is "a synthesis between these insights and text-analytical traditions which emphasizes what the language actually does" (Fairclough, 1995: 131). Thus, discourse is social action and social practice, shaping and being shaped by institutions, relations and ideologies within which it circulates. Language use is therefore historically and socially situated. Fairclough's later work positions discourse in social practice in three interconnected ways: as "ways of acting, ways of representing, and ways of being" (2003: 26). This approach helps explain how *Free* frames freedom, authority, and identity through competing linguistic and ideological positions.

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach provides a complementary foundation for understanding how *Free* portrays ideological worldviews under socialism and postsocialism. For van Dijk, ideologies are socially shared belief systems that shape group identity, norms, and interpretations of social variety. Despite such variety, ideologies share "their central 'mental' character […] the beliefs of collectivities of people" (van Dijk, 1998: 11) and shape mental models for interpreting the world. A central element of van Dijk's account is the distinction between personal mental models, subjective, episodic representations of events, and the collective ideological frameworks stored in long-term memory. Groups, he notes, "associate different beliefs with different types of memory […] with different levels of generality" (van Dijk, 1998: 13). This distinction is crucial in *Free*, where the adult narrator revisits childhood experiences shaped by state ideology but reinterprets them through a more informed, critical lens. Van Dijk's later work further clarifies how discourse shapes cognition: it can produce "biased mental models and social representations such as knowledge and ideologies" (van Dijk, 2006: 359), a phenomenon visible in Ypi's navigation of socialist rhetoric and post-socialist narratives.

Maria Todorova's work contributes a crucial regional dimension by situating Albanian socialism and its aftermath within the longer history of Balkan representation. Todorova (2009) shows how "Balkanization quickly became a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian" (Todorova, 2009: 3), transforming a geographic term into "one of the most powerful pejorative designations in history" (2009: 7). Such external representations position the region as perpetually incomplete, unstable, or belated in relation to Europe. Importantly, Todorova emphasizes the relational nature of these constructions: "The perception of the Orient has been, therefore, relational, depending on the normative value set and the observation point" (2009: 12). These insights illuminate *Free*, where Ypi navigates both internal ideological narratives and external Balkanist stereotypes. The memoir becomes a site where inherited regional imaginaries intersect with lived experience, challenging static categories through which Albania and the Balkans have often been perceived.

Building on these perspectives, Bakhtin's theorization of dialogism and heteroglossia further clarifies the narrative complexity of *Free*. Bakhtin writes that

"the novelistic image of a language is always a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language" (Bakhtin, 1981: 272). This tension is particularly salient in *Free*, where the child narrator's earnest repetition of ideological discourse is refracted through the adult narrator's retrospective irony. As Bakhtin insists, "the authentic environment of an utterance […] is dialogized heteroglossia" (272): official socialist vocabulary, familial codes of silence, and later liberal-democratic discourses coexist and collide in Ypi's narrative. Freedom itself becomes a heteroglossic construct, voiced differently across ideological epochs and narrative positions.

Narrative theory, particularly Genette's (1980), sharpens this understanding by distinguishing among story, narrative, and narrating. Genette notes that "we must plainly distinguish under this term [narrative] three distinct notions" (Genette, 1980: 25), and emphasizes that meaning emerges from the act of telling: "the narrative discourse depends absolutely on the action of telling" (1980: 27). Genette's analysis of focalization is equally pertinent. Drawing on Culler, he stresses the importance of asking "who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?" as distinct from "who is the narrator?" (Culler in Genette, 1980: 10). This distinction is central to *Free*, whose retrospective structure continually reinterprets past events from a later ideological standpoint. Irony frequently emerges from this shifting lens: what the child perceives as coherent or heroic is reframed by the adult narrator as ideological illusion or misunderstanding.

Hayden White's theorization of narrative provides a final conceptual layer by emphasizing the constitutive nature of narrative form. White argues that narrative is "a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (White, 1987: 1). Crucially, he insists that "the content of the discourse consists as much of its form as it does of whatever information might be extracted from a reading of it" (White, 1987: 42). Meaning is generated through emplotment, whereby "any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways […] it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning" (44). This insight is especially relevant for *Free*, which does not simply recount life under socialism and transition but retrospectively arranges memories, ideological ruptures, and disillusionments into a narrative structure that interprets the historical significance of systemic change. Ypi's memoir thereby demonstrates how narrative form itself produces meaning, transforming lived experience into a reflective account of freedom, constraint, and ideological transition.

2. Corpus and materials

The primary material for this study is Lea Ypi's memoir *Free* (2021), examined in both the original English edition and the Albanian version, which the author translated herself. Because Ypi is author of both texts, the two versions display a high level of fidelity. Minor lexical differences occur naturally between the languages, but none of these affect the memoir's discursive strategies or narrative stance. The Albanian edition is therefore used mainly as a supplementary

reference to confirm voice consistency and to highlight cultural resonances where relevant, while the English text remains the principal basis for analysis, as it introduced the memoir to an international readership and positioned Albania's experience within a broader transnational discourse.

Reading the two versions comparatively revealed no meaningful shifts in tone, irony, or ideological framing. Translation does not function as a site of divergence but as an extension of the memoir's unified narrative voice. For this reason, the study treats *Free* as a single discursive artefact, focusing on its strategies of narration, memory, and ideological repositioning rather than on interlingual variation.

3. Key thematic and discursive axes in "*Free*"

Lea Ypi's *Free* is not only a personal memoir but a discursive inquiry into what it means to live within and beyond ideology. Through irony, heteroglossic tensions, and retrospective narration, the memoir interrogates the competing discourses that claimed to define "freedom" in late socialism and during the post-communist transition. Three major axes emerge: (1) the ideological paradoxes surrounding freedom, (2) the role of memory, irony, and double-voiced narration, and (3) the disillusioning experience of the transition as a discursive rupture.

3.1 Freedom and ideology

From its opening line, the memoir frames freedom as a contested and unstable concept: "*I never asked about the meaning of freedom until the day I hugged Stalin*" (p. 3). The scene immediately exposes the contradictions shaping the idea of freedom in late socialist Albania. The child's affectionate gesture toward the dictator, encouraged by propagandistic descriptions of his "smiling eyes", coexists with a public act of protest she does not yet understand. The moment captures how official discourse defined freedom as loyalty to socialism, while events around her were already redefining it as rupture and dissent.

In school, ideological discourse further shaped the meaning of freedom:

> Of course, freedom had a cost, teacher Nora said. We had always defended freedom alone. Now they were all paying a price. They were in disarray. We were standing strong. We would continue to lead by example. We had neither money nor weapons, but we continued to resist the siren call of the revisionist East and the imperialist West, and our existence gave hope to all the other small nations whose dignity continued to be trampled on. The honor of belonging to a just society would be matched only by the gratitude felt for being sheltered from the horrors unfolding elsewhere in the world, places where children starved to death, froze in the cold or were forced to work (p. 18).

Teacher Nora's lesson transforms Albania's isolation into heroic endurance. Freedom becomes a moral badge rather than a lived condition, grounded in oppositions between a dignified "us" and a corrupt or suffering

"them." For the child, such rhetoric provides clarity and reassurance; for the adult narrator, it reveals how ideology relied on fear, comparison, and moral exceptionalism to naturalize scarcity and control.

With the regime's collapse, the vocabulary of freedom is rapidly reconfigured:

> For the humanities, either new classes were introduced, such as when Market Economy replaced Dialectical Materialism, and we had no textbooks at all, or, as with the history and geography material, they still described our country as 'the lighthouse of anti-imperialist struggles around the world' (p. 253).

Here socialist and capitalist discourses coexist uneasily, new subjects taught without textbooks alongside lingering slogans about Albania's revolutionary mission. This hybrid moment demonstrates the slow erosion of ideological frameworks: even after political rupture, older narratives continue to shape identity and interpretation. For the narrator, the overlap creates cognitive dissonance, showing how the meaning of freedom becomes unstable and fragmented during transition. The memoir closes with its most explicit reflection on the instability of freedom:

> My world is as far from freedom as the one my parents tried to escape. Both fall short of that ideal. But their failures took distinctive forms, and without being able to understand them, we will remain for ever divided. I wrote my story to explain, to reconcile, and to continue the struggle (p. 310).

This passage crystallizes the book's central argument: both socialism and liberal democracy generate their own discourses of freedom, each promising emancipation yet falling short in different ways. Ypi rejects a simple opposition between oppression and liberation, insisting instead that freedom is continually negotiated, rhetorically claimed, and reinterpreted. Her closing statement positions the memoir as an effort to understand and reconcile these competing narratives, a reminder that freedom is not a fixed reality but a discursive construction shaped by memory, ideology, and the act of storytelling itself.

3.2 Memory, irony, and double-voiced narration

Much of *Free's* emotional force lies in the way Ypi reconstructs childhood memories through the ironic awareness of the adult narrator. This double-voiced structure, naïve experience reframed by retrospective insight, reveals how ideology shaped family life, communication, and self-understanding. A family exchange between Lea and her father illustrates this dynamic vividly:

> 'Do you know what the hardest thing I've done in my life is?' my father asked one gusty November morning before going to work. He stood in front of the closed curtains in our living room, listening to

> the sound of the window frame rattling from the draught, stirring his coffee. 'Was it when you had to lie to me about our relation to Ypi the prime minister?" I asked. 'That must have been hard.' He shook his head. 'Wait, I know, I said. 'Remember when I was desperate to have a photo of Enver Hoxha on the bookshelf. You told me we needed a nice frame for it, and we had to wait until it would be ready. I almost believed that' I chuckled (p. 240).

The child's innocence and the father's quiet humor intertwine, exposing how political fear was managed through gentle deflection, and how memory later reveals the emotional labor behind such performances. This use of irony as emotional protection is made explicit in Ypi's description of her father:

> My father joked more than anyone else. He joked all the time, so much so that it was often difficult to infer from the tone of his questions if they were intended seriously or if he wanted to make us laugh. At one point in his life, he had figured out that irony was more than a rhetorical device, it was a mode of survival. He made ample use of it and was usually pleased when my brother and I tried to mimic him (p. 241).

Here irony becomes not merely a stylistic feature but a survival strategy within a system where direct criticism was dangerous. The adult narrator's reflection underlines how humor mediated fear, softened truth, and allowed the family to follow ideological constraints without explicit rebellion. Family dialogue often carries unspoken tension. In one early scene, a conversation about her grandfather slips abruptly into fear and restraint: "'The real enemies of the people - Don't pull my sleeve,' she said, interrupting herself, and turned aggressively to my father, who was now very close to her and had started to breathe heavily. "They say he was a traitor, well…'" (p. 28). The unfinished sentence and tense body language reveal how memory is shaped by silence as much as by speech. The child does not grasp the full weight of the word "traitor," while the adult narrator recognizes it as a site of stigma, secrecy, and unhealed family trauma. Memory and irony converge again when Ypi describes the emotional landscape of her adolescence:

> My teenage years were mostly ones of misery, a predicament which intensified the more my family denied that it had cause to exist. They seemed to assume that one was entitled to feel wretched only when there were objective grounds: if you were at risk of starving or freezing or had no place to sleep, or lived under the threat of violence. These were absolute thresholds. If something could be done to raise yourself above the threshold, you forfeited your right to protest; otherwise, it would be an insult to those less fortunate. It was a bit like with food vouchers under socialism. Since everyone had a share

> of something, hunger couldn't possibly exist. If you said you were hungry, you became an enemy of the people (p. 251).

Here the comparison between emotional suffering and socialist "thresholds" for hunger reveals how political logic infiltrated family expectations. The adult narrator uses irony to expose a deeply internalized belief: that suffering must be justified, measured, and morally validated, echoing ideological norms that denied lack because "everyone had a share of something".

Across these episodes, memory functions as revelation, while irony bridges past and present, allowing the narrator to retain the authenticity of childhood perception, yet exposing the ideological pressures that organized family life. The memoir's double-voiced narration becomes a tool for analyzing how fear, humor, silence, and misunderstanding structured everyday experience under socialism.

3.3 Post-communist transition and disillusionment

The post-communist chapters of *Free* portray transition not as straightforward liberation but as another discursively mediated system of expectations and abstractions. Ypi captures the linguistic shift of the 1990s with characteristic precision:

> 'Civil society' was the new term… It joined other new keywords, such as 'liberalization', which replaced 'democratic centralism'; 'privatization', which replaced 'collectivization'; 'transparency', which replaced 'self-criticism'; 'transition', which stayed the same but now indicated the transition from socialism to liberalism… and 'fighting corruption', which replaced 'anti-imperialist struggle' (pp. 215–216).

The sheer substitution of terms suggests that the ideological center merely shifted rather than dissolved. Freedom is again framed discursively rather than materially, now through Western political vocabulary that, like socialist slogans before it, promises transformation without providing clarity or stability. The ambiguities of transition become personal in the figure of Ypi's father, whose moral discomfort exposes the tensions between imported economic reforms and lived ethics:

> Structural reform is like going to the dentist: you can postpone it, but the more you postpone it, the more painful it will get. But my father had never wanted to be a dentist; he'd wanted to be something other than what he was, although he had never had a chance to discover what. He remained a dissident at heart. He was critical of capitalism. He had never believed in the rules he was now asked to enact. He did not have much faith in socialism either. He hated authority in all its forms. Now that he represented that authority, he resented the role. He would neither endorse structural reforms nor obstruct them. He

> hated wrecking people's lives, and he hated leaving the dirty work to others (p. 247).

His new role forces him into a position he neither desired nor believed in. The discontinuity between belief and institutional duty illustrates the emotional burden of enforcing reforms presented as inevitable. A deeper moral crisis emerges when Ypi reflects on her father's struggle to reconcile ideals with practice: "*He didn't share Van de Berg's ideas… He was more preoccupied by freedom of thought, the right to protest… He knew that one can injure others by acting in good faith… How could he suddenly become the offender?*" (p. 250). His fear of "believing too much" mirrors the disillusionment of many who had lived through one failed ideology only to face another presented as universal truth. The passage illustrates the memoir's recurring question: what does it mean to pursue freedom ethically when political systems continually redefine it?

The most profound expression of disorientation appears in Ypi's recounting of how she accepted reductive foreign explanations of Albania's collapse:

> I accepted… that the Albanian civil war could be explained… by long-standing animosities between Ghegs and Tosks… I accepted it despite its absurdity… I accepted it as we all did… as we accepted the liberal road map… as we accepted that its plan could be disrupted only by outside factors and never by its own contradictions (p. 300).

The repetition of "I accepted" conveys cognitive exhaustion. When internal narratives collapse, external discourses, however reductive, fill the void. The passage shows how identities and interpretations are reshaped by geopolitically imposed explanations that ignore lived complexities. This section culminates in a reflection on despair:

> I accepted that history repeats itself. I remember thinking: is this what my parents experienced? Is this what they wanted me to experience? Is this what losing hope looks like, becoming indifferent to categorization, to nuance, to making distinctions, to assessing the plausibility of different interpretations, to truth? (p. 300)

Here transition appears not as emancipation but as another system of ideological contradictions, eroding the very interpretive tools needed for understanding. These episodes help us realize how *Free* portrays post-communist transition not as liberation but as another discursively mediated system of expectations, abstractions, and disappointments. Freedom again appears as an unstable promise, first socialist, then liberal, continually narrated, renamed, and deferred. The instability of freedom across both socialist and post-socialist periods is captured in one of the memoir's most poignant statements: "*Things were one way, and then they were another. I was someone, then I became someone else*" (p. 138). This line compresses the existential rupture produced by ideological change:

not only systems but selves are remade. Across its episodes of childhood innocence, adult irony, institutional commotion and moral disorientation, *Free* reveals that freedom is not a stable possession but a shifting discourse negotiated through language, memory, and narrative. The memoir's power lies in showing how political transformation reshapes identity itself, how individuals are compelled to rewrite who they are each time history rewrites the world around them.

Conclusions

This study has examined *Free* as a discursive and narrative construction of freedom, ideology, and memory in late socialist and post-socialist Albania. Drawing on Fairclough, van Dijk, Todorova, Bakhtin, Genette, and White, the analysis showed that the memoir presents freedom not as a stable political ideal but as a shifting, contested discourse shaped by competing ideological frameworks and altered through a double-voiced narrative perspective. The child's understanding of socialism, rooted in slogans, loyalty, and euphemisms, reflects the cognitive models shaped by state discourse, while the adult narrator revisits these experiences with irony and critical distance. Through this interplay, *Free* becomes a heteroglossic space where official ideology, family silence, post-transition rhetoric, and reflective adulthood intersect. The memoir ultimately demonstrates that freedom is historically conditioned and emotionally fraught, continually renegotiated through language, memory, and narrative form.

Future research could broaden this discussion by comparing *Free* with other post-socialist memoirs, analyzing its public reception, or conducting a corpus-based study of key ideological terms. Further work might also explore how readers in different cultural and political contexts interpret *Free*, and investigate how emotions, memory, and ideological experience shape the memoir's narration of socialism and transition.

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