

The Concept of 'Heimat' (Home) in Herta Müller's literary Works

Ruchi Pawar

Assistant Professor (German), Amity School of Languages, Amity University Rajasthan, Jaipur, India
Email - rpawar@jpr.amity.edu

Abstract: The following article explores the concept of 'Heimat' both in its general sense and within the works of Herta Müller. Müller, a prominent representative of Romanian-born German authors, has made significant contributions to contemporary German literature. The central thesis of this paper posits that 'Heimat' (Home) for Müller is a myth, a notion that is critically examined and deconstructed throughout her literary works. This article aims to provide a thorough analysis of this polysemantic term and its nuanced implications in the context of Müller's literary works.

Key Words: Herta Müller, Heimat, Home, German literature, Myth, Banat Schwabians.

1. INTRODUCTION :

The history of present Romanian territory points out the immigration waves of Germans during the 18th century. These were the 'Banat Swabians'. The other regions of the Romania which were inhabited by Germans were the regions of Sathmar, Bukovina und Dobruja regions. With the end of 1st world war and the collapse of Austrian Hungarian Monarchy many nation states became a part of the world map. The regions Moldavia, Walachia, South-Dobruja, North-Bukovina, Transylvanian, and Bessarabia also became the part of the national state of Romania in the year 1919 -1920. According to Christoph Parry the Europe is forcefully also the Europe of Enclaves and Exclaves. The development of national state aiming for ethnical and lingual Homogeneity among its inhabitants lead to the conflict among the minority regions, which couldn't accommodate themselves in the desired picture.

"Je intensiver sich die großen Nationen um Homogenität und klar umrissene nationale Identitäten bemühten, desto mehr mussten Gruppen, die sprachlich, ethnisch, oder religiös nicht hineinpassten, zu Problemfällen werden." (Parry 93)

Herta Müller appears to occupy a central position on the cross-cultural stage of German literature, the investigation of the author and her literary creation proves to be suitable for the study of the discourse on 'Heimat'. Müller was born in 1953 in a Swabian village of Romania, where the mother tongue of the community was a dialect of German, the 'Banat-Swabian dialect'. Living, studying and working in Romania as a member of a minority community was a multicultural mileau. Müller's literary carrier started under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu, but due to the persecutions of the Securitate she found no other alternative than immigrating to Germany. With Richard Wagner, her husband and an active author she left Romania in 1987 and objected the status of the home returning ethnic Germans and wanted to be accepted as political refugee, thus confusing the German immigration.

Thomas Cooper finds Herta Müller's immigration to Germany as a counterpoint to classical model of Exile. The idea of 'belongingness' in her case is elusive as she didn't return to the 'Heimat' (Home) and arrived at a more foreign place. She although creates a hybrid, transcultural space for herself in her fiction through her poetic language. *"Leaving Romania for Germany Müller left a community in which she was a member of a linguistic minority and entered a state in which her mother tongue was the common language. She thereby constitutes a counterpoint to the classical model of Exile; her case exposes the limitations of the figure of the exile as outsider by reminding us of notions of belonging are elusive and often lose their consistency on closer scrutiny."* (Cooper 475)

According to Paola Bozzi the term 'Heimat' has different meanings and associations. The term arouses different associations like: Community, Family, traditions, Memories and Identity. For the majority of People 'Heimat' relates to strong feelings. It can refer to a place where one can live, where one is born and brought up, or a mythical Fatherland of relatives and forefathers which one might have never seen. The term 'Heimat' is untranslatable.

“Das Umdenken und Umschreiben des Begriffs „Heimat“ kreist die widersprüchliche Vielfalt der Bedeutungen um das Konzept der Heimat ein. Die Assoziationen, die der Begriff leicht hervorruft, sind die der Gemeinde und des Angehörens, der Familie, der geteilten Traditionen, Erinnerungen und Identität. Für die Mehrzahl der Menschen ist Heimat noch immer mit starken Gefühlen verbunden; der Begriff kann sich auf den Ort beziehen, wo man lebt, wo man aufgewachsen ist, oder auf das mythische Vaterland der Verwandten und Vorfahren, das man eigentlich nie hat sehen können” (*Rethinking and rewriting the term "home" encompasses various contradictory meanings of the term surrounding the concept of home. The associations that the term evokes are those of community and belonging, family, shared traditions, memories, and identity. For most people, home is still associated with strong feelings; the term can refer to the place where one lives, where one grew up, or to the mythical fatherland of relatives and ancestors that one has never actually been able to see*”; my trans. 43)

She elaborates the term as a field of tension between elaborated construct and postulated anthropological Universe, between cultural term and individual associations, between topos and living traditions, between political instrument and cultivated cultural asset [...] between reality and phantasm, between conservatism and transformation, between matter and emotion, and has become a conceptual and definitional Chimera.

“Im Spannungsfeld zwischen elaboriertem Konstrukt und postulierter anthropologischer Universalie, zwischen kulturellem Schlüsselbegriff und individuellem Assoziationsfeld, zwischen Topos und (gelebter) Tradition, zwischen politischem Instrumentarium und gepflegtem Kulturgut, zwischen historischem Chamäleon und persönlicher Konstante, zwischen agitatorischer Valenz und subjektivem Wert, zwischen Realität und Phantasma, zwischen Konservatismus und Transformation, auch zwischen Sachlichkeit und Emotion, arriviert ‚Heimat‘ zu einer begrifflichen und definitorischen Chimäre.“ (Kanne 14)

As already known the German word ‘Heimat’ refers to private as well as public space (‘Heimat’ as homely and as Fatherland or a Nation) implies a tension which Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty concisely expresses as “*tension between the desire for home, for synchrony, for sameness, and the realization of the repressions and violence that make home, harmony, sameness imaginable, and that enforce it.*” (Biddy et.al 208)

In her study of the concept of ‘Heimat’ among the people of Germany Celia Applegate claims that ‘Heimat’ has been a myth and has never existed in reality. It refers to an ‘utopic’ place of a community in times of fragmentation and alienation. “*Heimat has never been a word about real social forces or real political situations. Instead, it has been a myth about the possibility of a community in the face of fragmentation and alienation.*” (Applegate 19)

Cultural anthropologist Ina- Maria has very rightly described the term ‘Heimat’ as a place which satisfies one’s need of Identity, Security and active way of living. (Greverus 212)

According to Nobert Mecklenburg ‘Heimat’ does not denotes the objective qualities of a place but the subjective and emotional relationship of the one who uses the term for a that particular place, landscape or a region. It is that which shapes one’s Identity: personal as well as collective. ‘Heimat’ is therefore a place or region not in itself but always in relation to an individual or a group. Therefore ‘Heimat-literature’ thematises the emotional connection with it and a subjective perspective of narrator or the protagonist about the place or his longing for it.

“*Heimat hingegen bezeichne im Gegensatz zu Region, so Mecklenburg weiter, nicht die objektiven Eigenschaften eines Raumes, sondern die subjektive und emotionale Beziehung dessen, der den Begriff benutzt, zu einem bestimmten Ort, einer Landschaft oder einer Region. [...] Das ist es, was Identität ermöglicht, und zwar sowohl personale wie kollektive. Heimat ist also ein Ort oder eine Region niemals an sich, sondern immer nur für jemanden oder für eine Gruppe, und neuere Heimatliteratur folglich jene, die aus subjektivem Blickwinkel die emotionale Verbundenheit des Erzählers oder seiner handelnden Personen mit einem Ort oder –im Falle von „Heimweh“ – Literatur – die Sehnsucht danach thematisiert.*“ (Bozzi 45)

Herta Müller criticizes in the first book ‘Niderungen’ the stagnant village life in Romania which brought her the name ‘Writer of Anti-heimatliteratur’. What by huge number of readers in Germany and Romania as literary successful received, was seen by the defenders of Banat Swabian Heimat as “Nestbeschmutzung”¹. According to Wiebke Sievers Herta Müller blatantly deconstruct in her Prose Band ‘Niederungen, the self representation of Romanian-Germans in public discourse. The hard earned ‘Heimat’ with its traditions and customs turns into “*Romanian-German anti Heimat.*” (Sievers 219)

She criticizes the ethnocentrism and rigid hierarchy of the village society. The radical in Herta Müller’s writings is the brutality of Images in a seemingly poetical language. She throws a sharp critic on the repressive Romanian regime under rule of Ceausescu, the active participation of parent generation in Nazi atrocities, the deportation of numerous Banat-Germans to soviet labour camps, patriarchal family and social structure of the village community and its brutal education system.

¹ denigration of one's family/country

2. CONCLUSION

Instead of the conventional aspect of Landscape and tradition and the love for 'Heimat' which is typical of every Heimat-literature she exhibits a critical attitude towards her own origin and towards the term 'Heimat'. She problematises the question of 'Heimat'. In her work she equally condemns the oppressive atmosphere of the 'Dorfheimat (Village Home)' as well as the Ceausescu regime. Both are 'Heimat' and have negative connotations for her. In her short autobiographic title Text, "Der Koenig verneigt sich und toetet" which appeared in her book with the same name she expresses her dislike and disgust for the term "Heimat" and its conventional associations.

Clearly the term "Heimat" appears in works of Herta Müller in a negative connotation which is Anti-Heimat. Her Anti-heimat literature is based not only against the term 'Heimat' but also radically alienates from the structure and content of traditional Heimat- literature. She deconstructs the Myth of 'Heimat' in her works. With their contribution authors like Herta Müller attempts to provide recognition to the minorities but also warn against the dangers of blind compliance and introvert Pseudo identity.

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