

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN FAMILY AND NATIONALISM IN GUNTER GRASS'S *THE TIN DRUM*

Kavya T.
M.A B.Ed. NET
Shoranur, Palakkad
Kerala, 679122

Abstract

The Second World War has become a literary bog of creation and literature in turn defines and explains the concept of war. The Tin Drum delineates the uncreated conscience of German race and the representation of German identity has become problematic since they were both the perpetrators and victims of war. The article examines the power dynamics in an individual family and the corresponding political struggle of Germany and Poland.

Keywords: Family, power dynamics, ethnicity, individual and Second World War.

The aim of the article is to understand the power dynamics within an individual family in the backdrop of the larger political power struggles of the world. The family as unit is constituted by individuals who struggle to get their voices heard. The ordinary people do not directly get involved in the conflicts of their nation until war enters their household and wipes out the entire family. According to Benedict Anderson nation is “an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (*Imagined Communities* 49). He proposes that nation is not real idea but an imagined or unreal concept. But this idea or myth is so powerful that it has caused several wars and bloodshed in history. Pride in one's nation and martyrdom for the survival of nation were the very sources of power struggles in the wake of twentieth century. The metaphor of nation as family excludes the family unit from the power structure. According to Anne McClintock family is both an ‘organizing figure’ and ‘antitheses of national history. Thus family as an individual unit can either be an agency of creating a homogeneous history which robs family of its individualism and heterogeneity or be an opposing power in the general homogeneous nature of nation. The first and second world wars have always been much discussed from literary perspectives very often discussing political, social, ethnic and individual contexts. The great wars have become a literary bog of creation and literature in turn defines and explains the concept of war.

Gunter Grass was born on 16 October 1927 in Danzig, a time of growth of Nationalism and Nazi militarism. The birth between a period of National Socialism and the Second World

War had influenced the writings of Grass. The Tin Drum (1959) Cat and Mouse (1961) and The Dog Years (1963) collectively known as Danzig trilogy eponymous with the backdrop of each novel reminds that confronting the past wound is necessary to create a new German identity. A seminal work of the twentieth century *The Tin Drum* with its polyphonic themes had been dubbed as the modern German classic novel by the literary world. The novel's crux areas include: the effects of extreme nationalism that strives to create homogenous identity by completely annihilating multiculturalism and individualism, a history of Germany during the first half of the twentieth century viewed from the experiences of one family, the effect of war in the lives of ordinary people who are, themselves caught in the intriguing family dramas, callously if not foolishly indifferent towards the larger political game of the world. The novel traces the lives of Matzeraths, Bronskis and Koljiackz from the WWI towards the end of fall of Hitler and Germany after the second world war. The family is the microcosm of the political, cultural and ethnical matrix of power conflicts between two warring nations-Germany and Poland.

The Tin Drum delineates the uncreated conscience of German race because the two destructive world wars brought about a paradigm shift in the political and cultural milieu of Germany. The Germans were the perpetrators of the war a fact that demanded both acknowledgement and suppression of guilt. The wounds of the war were still fresh and have become a part of German identity. The representation of German identity has become problematic since they were both the perpetrators of war and its victims. There exists a contention between perpetrator and victim discourse in which Gunter Grass seems to support the former cause. His resentment toward Third Reich is unparalleled in the Danzig Trilogy. *The Tin Drum* is divided into three books chronicling the events of twentieth century through the metaphorical history of Matzerath family. Book one covers the period in which Danzig is a free city under the League of Nations mandate. Book two deals with the end of Second World War in 1945 and Book three is about the Germany after the war. In order to understand the role of family in the creation and perpetration of war the article searches the role of individual members and their involvement in war.

The Matzeraths family history reveals a mingling and mixing of different ethnicity – the Kashubian, German and Polish. In the beginning chapter of the novel Oskar examines the family photo album which places each member Matzerath family in the backdrop of political turmoil that consumed entire world. The First World War was a complete loss for Germany and Poland. Germany lost many territories and Poland needed more land. Thus as a newly formed free city Danzig was a center of contention which forced the city dwellers to choose between Germany and Poland. Joseph Koljaiczek, “firebug” was a Polish sympathizer. Being a Kashubian he was very pragmatic and never a staunch nationalist. In 1899 grandfather Koljaiczek worked for German sawmill in Pomerania. Being a supporter of Polish sentiments he painted the fence of sawmill with Polish national colours. Soon the German supervisor punished him for his insolence and the latter ignited by anger set sawmill on fire. Joseph was trailed by the police where he got refuge under the four layered skirt Anna Bronski who was working in the potato field. Joseph soon married Anna and assimilated into German identity- became fireman Wranka, a citizen of German empire. According to Oskar this fake identity troubled his grandfather most- a feeling that he divine from the photo album.

Alfred Matzerath from Rhineland was a WWI veteran who had been shot through thigh. Agnes Koljiackz met Alfred while working as a Nurse in WWI, and nursed him from the war

wound. Alfred becomes foil to Jan Bronskicousin and lover of Agnes when she leaves Jan for Alfred for unknown reason. They got married in the 1923, bought a grocery shop and renovated it. Matzeratha good cook learned Kashubiancuisinary and prepared extravagant dishes cleaned the kitchen and Agnes's presence attracted customers to the shop. It is interesting to note that while war clouds still looming over Europe these people built up a family life. Amidst the tumultuous war period they were busy attending theatre performances and circus. In the first 16 chapters that constitute Book 1 war seems far away fought in foreign lands. Alfred Matzerath is an opportunist in political and private life. When Alfred joined the Nazi party in 1934 the picture of Beethoven over the piano is replaced with a portrait of Hitler. He pieced together an old Nazi uniform and started attending Sunday rallies religiously. His observation "These are historic days. A man can't stand aside. Gotta join it. Duty is duty and Schnapps is Schnapps" summarisese very ordinary man's attitude towards war. They are ready to join the movement to retain the ordinariness of their lives. The metamorphoses of these characters are swift. But when the tide of war recedes in favour of allied forces people like Alfred had to hide. Alfred along with many friends and acquaintances of Matzerath family had to hide in the cellar of their shop. During the time of air raid by the Red Army Alfred was stockpiling food in the cellar. In the chapter titled Anthill trail Oskar recollects the death of Mother Trucznski and the violence of Red Army. Alfred and other refugees of cellar arranged the funeral of Mother Trucznski- coffin was made out of the bedroom door of Mother and she was buried in the park because the cemetery was closed for ordinary people. Even as the Russians were fast approaching Alfred had vein hopes of nazi victory because it meant retaining normal life for the family. But Lena Greffthe widow convinced Alfred to remove his Nazi party pin because it meant death if the Russians recognized the ideology of Alfred. On a fated day the Russians entered the cellar and they raped Lena Greff in turn and spared Maria because she had Kurt in her lap. But unfortunately for Alfred one of the soldiers saw him swallowing the Nazi pin and shot him dead. Ironically enough Mr Fajngold a Jewish man who had survived the concentration camp attended the funeral of Alfred .Fajngold had lost his entire family in the concentration camp but never accepts their death and still talked to them as if they were alive.

Jan Bronski was a Kashubian who supported Polish ideals soon after Danzig became a free city. But the truth is that the decision was never political but personal. He resented Agnes' marriage with a German, and to pacify himself Jan embraced Polish identity. Once he became Polish national Jan showed unwavering loyalty just as he exhibited love toward Agnes. Jan had even sent his children to Polish school even though both Agnes and Alfred advised him against it. This decision of Jan had put his son in an unhappy ordeal of harassment and physical violence by German students who called Stephen Polack, derogatory term for Polish supporters. Though loyal to his cause Jan panicked when Poland demanded his martyrdom on the siege of Polish Post Office by Germans on September 1939.He had no interest in fighting and tried to get a superficial scar by exposing his legs to the bullets. Jan is a simple civilian who did not want any part in the war. Even though Jan Bronski is executed after the Polish post Office siege he is commemorated as hero after the war.

The power dynamics among Alfred Matzerath , Agnes Matzerath and Jan Bronski is very much a parody of the contention between Germany and Poland over the City of Danzig. Both nations had set their claims on the free city of Danzig after the First World War. The Danzigers were unhappy with the dominance of Poland as the ninety percentage of the population were

Germans. Just like Danzig Agnes controlled the power struggle between Alfred, a German and Jan Bronski, a Polish supporter. Thus Grass politicizes the love triangle as a triangle of power struggle. Interestingly after the death of Agnes both men did not survive as Germany and Poland's bleak future after the fall of Danzig city.

Ostensibly *The Tin Drum* is the life story of the dwarf Oskar, who recollects his adventures in the prewar, war time and post war Germany. Oskar Matzerath, the gnome hero, an artist in his own right writes a memoir at the age of thirty from a mental asylum. Oskar was born as a clairaudient infant whose mental development is completed at the time of birth. At the age of three he stopped growing and became a drummer. In order to control his growth he threw himself off the cellar steps. If it were not for the drums he would not have been born at all. In order to protect his drums from intruders he learns to shatter glass with his voice. Oskar believes in art for art's sake dictum and claims that he never played but worked on his drums. The drums allow him to protest against the adult world. In the chapter titled *The Rostrum* Oskar turns the Nazi gathering into a violent dance. After the death of Jan Bronski, Oskar joins the theatre of Berba, a touring company of dwarfs providing entertainment for German soldiers. During the reign of Hitler Oskar's crippled size was a defect in the eyes of Nazis but he represented a sane element in a crippled society. According to Oskar he decided to control his growth in order to keep adults at a distance. He had witnessed the moral poverty of his parents and deliberately refused to let his surroundings.

The childhood memory of Oskar is vivid with the image of Agnes visiting Sigmund Markus's Jewish toy shop where he gets new drums. He also remembers Agnes' love adventures with Jan Bronski whom she visits on every Thursday. Thus through the window of Matzerath family Grass draws a vivid picture of Danzig city in all its cultural diversities. The neighborhood of Matzerath family includes Meyn the musician, The Greff family, the Trucznski family, Scheffler the banker and Laubschad the watchmaker. All these people lead a normal life before the war years, complacently watching the rise of Nazism in Germany and the political tension between Poland and Germany over the free city of Danzig. They did nothing to prevent the catastrophe and became victims of the evil they allowed to penetrate their soil. The *Cristal Night Pogrom* and *siege of Polish Post Office* by German soldiers crumbled their reveries. They witnessed the suicide of Sigmund Markus, the owner of Jewish toy shop and execution of Jan Bronski among other catastrophes. Oskar's cynical observations throw light upon the bourgeoisie culture of the adults, their petty obsessions, deceptions, parades and demonstrations of the Nazi party etcetera.

After the war Oskar goes to West Germany along with Maria and Kurts. In West Germany Oskar takes up a number of jobs like assistant to a stonecutter, model for the Dusseldorf Academy of Arts students and a drummer. But after the currency reform that had hit the German economy Korneff had no money to pay him for stonecutting. Then he became a model for art students at the academy who took interest in the deformed body of Oskar. According to Kuchen professor of the academy the deformed body and blazing eyes of Oskar represent twentieth century perfectly. The post war Germany had turned into a bourgeois society who refused to remember immediate past. When Anna protected the fugitive Koljaiczek from his persecutors she returned a responsive echo to the needs of the world. This sense of responsibility which Anna possessed intuitively is developed by Oscar with conscious efforts. But this change happened after a number of experiences. In the first book Oskar met Berba a circus clown whose

offer to join the circus community was turned by Oskar. When Oscar turns down the offer Berba warns that “they are coming” “they will fill rostrums”. He continues “our kind has no place in the audience. We must perform, we must run the show. If we don’t it’s the others that run us. And they don’t do it with kid gloves” (14). Oskar understood the meanings of these words and towards the end of the second book joins the circus community. In 1941 Oskar joined Berba’s Theater at the Front and departed for Paris. Berba, the middle aged jester for the propaganda company, was admired by all the officers. They continued to perform for the German soldiers till 1944. During this time Oskar never remembers his family and enjoys a relation with Roswitha Raguna, a fellow dwarf. By this time the Allied forces began to siege the beaches and Roswitha got killed in the process. Thus the war again took away important person from Oskar’s life. But in reality he is every ordinary German individual who consciously allowed the war to continue. The detachment and anger that he exhibits throughout the novel do not justify the horrible things he committed. He betrayed Jan Bronski and the Dusters, a youth group who protested against the grownups world. It is only towards the end of the novel that Oskar confesses all the horrible things he had committed.

This article has examined the life of an ordinary family caught up in the midst Second World War as well as the role of each individual in perpetrating the war. The domestic space can no longer remain personnel and closed. The internal crises often interconnect with the social constructs and national identity unbeknownst to the participants. Gunter Grass harshly criticizes the middle class’s involvement with fascism. They are the pillars which sustains Nazism through their oblivions about life around them. They are engrossed in personal and family intrigues that they hardly give attention to the war. It is as if the war is fought somewhere else. Their indifference makes us question the reality and impact of the war. There are numerous descriptions of objects and commodities that expose the ordinariness and ludicrousness of adults’ lives. The Matzerath- Bronski - Koljiackz extended family played an engaging role in the political struggle of Germany and Poland. A memoir of the family thus becomes a history of extreme nationalism and its impact on ordinary lives. The study suggests that a reading of private experiences would enhance the knowledge of national history.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.1991.Print.
- Grass,Gunter. *Die Blechtrommel*. Trans.RalphManheim.NewYork:Vintage International, 1990.Print.
- Kasikhan,HR. “The Absence of ‘Paucity’and ‘Momentariness’: Two New Components of Magical Realism in Grass’s The Tin Drum”. *JTLS* 4.2.2012.Web.
- Mandoiu, Ruxandra. *Literary Representation of Family and Nation in the Writings of JosephRoth,Gunter Grass, Milan Kundera and Ingeborg Bachmann*. Syracuse University. 1997. Web.