



RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST IN GÜNTER GRASS'S "CRABWALK"

GÜNTER GRASS'IN "YENGEÇ YÜRÜYÜŞÜ" ADLI ROMANINDA GEÇMİŞİN YENİDEN KURGULANIŞI

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Abstract

This study examines the memories of different generations within the framework of reminiscence literature in the novel *Crabwalk* (*Im Krebsgang*, 2002) by Günter Grass, one of the important first-generation writers of German literature after World War II. The theme of the work is based on the story of Wilhelm Gustloff ship that was torpedoed by the Soviet Submarine in 1945. Günter Grass reconstructs the story with reference to collective and cultural memories to convey the narrative in context of this historical event, which refers to the recent history of Germany with the example of the Pokriefke family. This study also investigates how the past or history is aestheticized in literature through three different generations in accordance with the memory theories of Jan and Aleida Assmann and Harald Welzer.

Öz

Bu çalışmada II. Dünya Savaşı sonrası Alman edebiyatının önemli birinci kuşak yazarlarından Günter Grass'ın, "Yengeç Yürüyüşü" (*Im Krebsgang*, 2002) adlı eserinde yer alan farklı kuşak bellekleri anımsama edebiyatı çerçevesinde incelenmiştir. Eserin odak noktasını 1945 yılında Sovyet Denizaltısı tarafından torpillenerek batırılan Wilhelm Gustloff gemisinin öyküsü oluşturmaktadır. Günter Grass, Pokriefke ailesi örneğinde Almanya'nın yakın tarihine işaret eden bu tarihsel olgu bağlamında aktarmak istediği öyküyü kolektif ve kültürel belleğin referanslarına dayandırarak yeniden kurgular. Bu çalışmada, Jan ve Aleida Assmann ile Harald Welzer'in bellek kuramları doğrultusunda edebiyat düzleminde geçmişin ve tarihin üç değişik kuşak aracılığıyla nasıl estetize edildiği irdelenmiştir.

Introduction

The emerged socio-political and cultural scenario with the end of World War II in 1945 disclosed the deep effects of Nazi fascism on German society. It would not be easy to rebuild the life and healing of social wounds of war, during which more than fifty million people lost their lives and millions of people got wounded and became refugees. During the years 1945 to 1949, it was not clear that how the German society would cope with the burden of past contaminated with the horrific event of Jewish genocide in holocaust that was no longer a terrible secret. One of the first measures taken after the war was the process of trial and verdict of Nazis and their supporters by the Allies in the Nuremberg courts. Meanwhile, efforts to improve the economy of the country were also accelerated, and thus, all parts of

society were aimed to be cleared of Nazi ideology (Entnazifizierung). In addition, the general view of the society in that period was built to forget/suppress the past and open a clean page for the future. The period during the years 1945 to 1957 is defined as the period of communicative silence, as the society remained silent or overlooked offenses and concentration camps of Nazis (A. Assmann and Frevert 143).

However, in the 1970s, German student movement of 1968 encouraged by worldwide protest movements brought a new dimension to the accountability of the past in Germany. The generation of 1968 had anger towards the silence of father generation about brutal practices of the National Socialists, especially genocide against the Jews, and this issue was also highlighted in different literature genres called as "Väterliteratur".¹ According to Aleida Assmann (60), the parents of the individuals of 1968 generation witnessed the outcomes of the World War I and the twelve-year period of the National Socialists and along with later generations of 1933 and 1945, the young generations coinciding with Hitler regime, witnessed the end of World War II and also worked as a Flakhelfer² till the end of the war. Therefore, the representatives of 1968 generation, who were completely contrary to their parents and questioning everything about past, did not accept the historical heritage of the previous generation.

In the 90s, political developments such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall (1989), the unification of East and West Germany (1990), the dissociation of Soviet Union (1991), the end of the Cold War (1991) and the Rise of the Iron Curtain (1991) changed the balance in many societies all over the world and those political changes lead to a significant breaking point in the development of the reminiscence culture, especially in the studies of memories linked to the main history in Germany. According to Jan Assmann (*Kültürel Bellek...* 17), the bases of memory

¹ Väterliteratur, the literary genre characterised by tormented familial narratives written by the descendents of Nazi perpetrators, offers important opportunities to analyse how the Holocaust and National Socialism are remembered by those who did not personally experience it. Väterliteratur emerged during 1970s and 1980s finding a receptive audience in the former West Germany. The poignancy of personal narrative combined with a quest for accountability compelled a new interest in family stories focusing on the Nazi past and intertwining of the roles of men as fathers, brothers and husbands with complicity in the crimes of National Socialism. Väterliteratur can also be interpreted as the final and definitive act of mourning by the second and increasingly third generation of writers for the actions of their individual patriarchal figures (see Andy Pearce. *Remembering the Holocaust in Educational Settings*. England: Routledge, 2018)

² The term like Luftwaffenhelfer or Flakhelfer is used for the member of the auxiliary staff of the German Airforce and implied the child soldiers during World War II (Neuhaus 75).

explosion, observed by almost all countries since the 1990s, lie under the changes in world's socio-political and economic balances especially after World War II, the talk of disasters in the media and the willingness of communities to face them.

Cultural memory is based on communication through media. Shared versions of the past are invariably generated by means of "medial externalization", the most basic form of which is oral speech, and the most common setting arguably that of grandparents telling children about the "old days." More sophisticated media technologies, such as writing, film, and the Internet, broaden the temporal and spatial range of remembrance. Cultural memory is constituted by a host of different media, operating with in various symbolic systems: religious texts, historical painting, historiography, TV documentaries, monuments, and commemorative rituals, for example. Each of these media has its specific way of remembering and will leave its trace on the memory it creates (Erll, "Cultural Memory Studies..." 12).

However, according to literary scholar Astrid Erll (*Kolektives Gedächtnis... 2-4*), the reasons for the development of memory culture are rooted in the events such as World War II, the end of the Cold War, migration movements in the world, media technologies, the removal of the boundaries of recording technology and postmodernism. "Memory-Boom also known as memory explosion" (Huysen 5), which is based on changing socio-political and economic regimes, has given rise to the political changes that occurred in Europe after the 1980s, and their influences has accelerated the cultural exchange between communities. The disasters of world wars taken place in the 20th century and eventuated outcomes on socio-economic and political arrangements of the world have paved the way to necessary review of the past in different aspects by many countries in the present era of globalization in 21st century. In general, the reinterpretation of commemorative days that depicts the memories of the countries has facilitated to develop new rational attitudes towards acceptance of war crimes and errors at the official levels. The new perspectives in the discourse of "offender" and "victim" has led to reanalyze the concepts such as "crime", "victim", "victory" and "defeat", which are the most important concepts of writing history (A. Assmann and Frevert 268).

In the post-1990 period, especially after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in Europe, literary products were again started to be critically evaluated as a reflection of socio-political and economic development in the country. According to Astrid Erll (*Kolektives Gedächtnis... 71*), past events started to be reconstructed in the literary

texts as a reflection of memory-boom especially based on the experiences and memories of the authors, in relation to individual and collective memories of the society developed through changes in borders and large migrations. However, according to Aleida Assmann (70-72), Germany has created a new culture of reminiscence and history with the official acceptance of the crimes of the past associated with bleak history of the country. In this respect, the so-called historical novels, written in the direction of confrontation, accountability and questioning of the past, has reinterpreted in terms of the relationship between memory and history in the fictional platform of literature. Therefore, a reminiscence prose parallel to the recollection culture started to emerge.

Everyday communication is characterized by a high degree of nonspecialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization. (...) Every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These "others," however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past. (...) Through the practice of oral history, we have gained a more precise insight into the peculiar qualities of this everyday form of collective memory... Its most important characteristic is its limited temporal horizon. As all oral history studies suggest, this horizon does not extend more than eighty to one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations... This horizon shifts in direct relation to the passing of time. The communicative memory offers no fixed point which would bind it to the ever expanding past in the passing of time. Such fixity can only be achieved through a cultural formation and therefore lies outside of informal everyday memory (J. Assmann, "Collective Memory..." 126-127).

In addition to since the life span of memories is spanned over three or four generations, the problem of authenticity and validity of historical knowledge in transfer of memories is inevitable. Therefore, the memories might be lost or cause false perceptions in the new generations if not transferred properly. Again, a new movement emerges in literature, parallel to *Väterliteratur* because of the historicization of the testimonies. This movement emphasized on the protection of historical chronicles by young generations and building a new historical consciousness. Examination of reminiscence literature in the form of letters, biographies, autobiographies and memoir novels has revealed the reflections of destruction brought by World War I and II in the memories of societies.

Reconstruction of The Past

Günter Grass, one of the post-war writers of contemporary German literature, has narrated the period of World War II and later in both offender and victim perspectives in his novel "Crabwalk" (Im Krebsgang, 2002) which is based on the story of a person assumed as victim by Germans. The distinguishing attribute of this piece of literature from other novels is the fact that the story is based on a real historical event of ship Wilhelm Gustloff. Swiss Nazi leader Wilhelm Gustloff was killed by a Jewish young man (David Frankfurter) in 1936. A cruise ship, constructed in 1937, was given the name Wilhelm Gustloff by Hitler's order. The working class and party members traveled on this ship until 1939. As of November 20, 1940, it started to serve as a military ship in the port of Gdynia near Danzig after being used as a hospital ship from November 1939 to November 1940. It was prepared for Hannibal Operation after waiting for four years at the port called Gotenhafen by the Germans. This operation was against the Soviet advancement of Courland, East and West Prussia. The families in these areas, the wounded soldiers and migrants fleeing from Eastern Europe would be brought to Kiel with Gustloff. The ship departed on January 30, 1945 and was torpedoed and sank by the Soviet submarine S-13 under the command of Alexander Marinesko. According to the records, over ten thousand people lost their lives of which mostly were women and children and only 996 people survived (Fischer and Lorenz 349).

W. G. Sebald, a writer on theme of memory and loss of memory, discussed in his work "On the Natural History of Destruction" (Luftkrieg und Literatur-1999) about German victims of the destructive policies in World War II based on the ideology of National Socialism and especially in the final stages of the war, the air strikes and countless deaths in German cities. He was concerned with the meager portrayal of the destruction of German cities and women and children as victims of the war in the literature. His work brought a new perspective in German literature. Therefore, the concept of "sacrifice" and "victim" was attributed to only certain groups in the reminiscence culture until the 90s. (Neuhaus 399) However, the work of Sebald started a new dimension of portraying the Germans as victims of war and in later literary works (e.g. Günter Grass's Im Krebsgang-2002 and Klaus Rainer Röhl's Verbotene Trauer. Ende der Deutschen Tabus-2002). Germans were not only portrayed as culprit and offender, instead, the reminiscence culture started to depict the memories of Germans as victim too (A. Assmann 109-185).

(...) Im Krebsgang as an example of the amazing ability of literary texts to change an entire generation's perception of history via the representation of a singular case, does indeed speak of and about his own generation _in Crabwalk represented by such figures as Paul Pokriefke and his ex-wife Gabi_ and explores the causes of their indifference toward German victims (Mews 318).

The focal point of the novel "Crabwalk" constitutes the memories of those who accept the Holocaust but are not intentionally convicted or who have died in the bombed cities and during the migration. Indeed, the analysis of German historical literature after the fall of the Berlin wall has revealed that the view of Germans as victims of war, a taboo in German history, came to the fore again and started to be expressed in literary texts. Grass, a writer born in Danzig, has considered the bleak history of the novel on forbidden topic and reinterpreted the story of Germans who were forced to migrate at the end of 1945 in the east in a retrospective expression in the literature. Grass narrates the recent history of Germany in the story of a fictional German immigrant family under the metaphor of "Wilhelm Gustloff" ship which was sunk by the Soviet submarine on January 30, 1945. This real historical event is transferred from the different perspectives of the three generations on the axis of the Pokriefke family's memory in the novel. The survivor of the "Wilhelm Gustloff" ship, Tulla Pokriefke, born in 1928, is a witness of the war period. She is a woman of seventy years old who does not want to forget about the tragedy of the ship she lives in. As described by the sociologist Michael Braun (16), Tulla's sole purpose is to convey the memories of that event to next generations as she is the first-generation vigilant witness, culprit or victim, of the event. However, while describing the memories of the ship's tragedy, she tries to transmit it within the framework of the information in her individual memory. According to the memory researcher Maurice Halbwachs (360), an individual may not transfer the specific memories to subsequent generations that would cause problems for their family to be admitted in the community to which they belong. Thus, reminiscences that are specifically based on the individual's memory have been deliberately changed in direction and a different new biography emerges.

In the novel Crabwalk, the grandmother Tulla is a traumatic figure who does not speak about her own private, but only wants to narrate her son a "victim's" perspective about sinking of the ship. According to memory theory of Harald Welzer (44), memories can be changed and altered for the good sake of family, some can be deleted or re-organized or stored in individual memory. The transmitted memories

are always reevaluated in present perspective and are reformed as they pass through the generation as they are reassessed and rearranged in a verbal form. The past continues to affect individuals and social identities. According to Harald Welzer (43-45), the family secret corresponds to the "Family album"; it provides information about memories and experiences of both the generation and collective memories. Therefore, in the novel, Tulla, who brought her son into the world while the ship sank, prefers to build a new biography in her memory regarding sinking of the Gustloff ship, as accepted on the official narratives of events, instead of describing her experienced trepidations. Even if Tulla wants to put the burden of the past, she is restricting herself or creating conscious gaps in her story when while transferring her memoirs because she may have a family secret about identity of Paul's father. Tulla's journalist son Paul, born on the day of sinking of Wilhelm Gustloff ship, is narrator of the story in the novel as a representative of the second generation, who got knowledge about past through collective and communicative memories. This generation, which was born between 1938-1948, preferred the silence because their families suffered from the deep trauma they experienced in the war (Bude 296-297).

In this context, the individual second-generation Paul, is "*one of the witnesses of the generation of questioning/criticizing the history*" (Braun 16) and is also the witness of the generation which never wanted to listen the past of his mother Tulla. He kept the stories he listened to himself and as a journalist he did not want to put it in writing. Besides, he also represents the generation that blames their parent's generation, though not like 1968 generation, and does not want to listen to them because of the burden they have to carry emotionally. However, as the author points out in the novel, the past does not allow it: "*The history we Germans have repeatedly mucked up is a clogged toilet. We flush and flush, but the shit keeps rising*" (Grass 122).

On the other hand, Elena Agazzi (22) mentioned that the second generation could not forget the past even if it wants because this generation has historical knowledge based not only on transfer of narratives of events but also the results of the past events. In this context, after the murder of his son in the novel, the second-generation Paul finally decides to write his family history to be accountable with his past. Therefore, it is described in the novel that the past is a phenomenon that must be assessed in the present time. In the novel, Konrad (Konny) is the son of Paul, born in 1984, and a representative of the third generation. Since Tulla's son, Paul, did not make the request to write her past, Tulla got close to her

grandson Konny and gave him a computer as a present. Her aim to get closer with grandson was to make him commemorate in writing her narrative of the event. However, Konny, a child of a divorced family, starts a discussion about the story of the Gustloff ship listened from his grandmother on the internet. He started discussion with a person who was a German but adopted the Jewish identity under the nickname of David Frankfurter on chat group named "blutzeug.de".

The chat room promptly filled with hate. "Jewish scum" and "Auschwitz liar" were the mildest insults. As the sinking of the ship was dredged up for a new generation, the long-submerged hate slogan "Death to all Jews" bubbled to the digital surface of contemporary reality: foaming hate, a maelstrom of hate. Good God! How much of this has been dammed up all this time, is growing day by day, and building pressure for action (Grass 160).

The discussion that started virtually on internet ended up with the murder of Wolfgang Stremplin nicknamed as David Frankfurter by Konny on meeting in real environment by the gun his grandmother given to him for his own protection. The tragedy of the ship and tragic end of her grandson Konny are the focal point of the novel. The relationship of his grandmother and father with history at individual level has caused a second tragedy in Konny's family. Thus, Grass has fictionalized the plot of novel around the event of murder of Swiss Nazi Party leader Wilhelm Gustloff by a Jewish young man David Frankfurter in 1936, at the height of the forces of the National Socialists in Germany. The novel highlights the historical responsibility of generations in transferring the historical events under the context of offender and victim discourses by sorting side by side the contrary event of murder of Wolfgang Stremplin, nicknamed David under Jewish identity, by Konny to the historical event in the form of crabwalk. Recognition of past errors especially for younger generations allows the planning of political and historical perspectives in the future and the burden of the present time can be mitigated (Schlink 73).

The "Wilhelm Gustloff ship" is used in the novel as a historical "memory space" (Nora), where the memories of different generations intersect between the past, present and future. Grass narrates the story of the journalist Paul, with this memory space, and thus, by describing the history of Germany in 1936 and 1945, a bridge from present to the past is established. In fact, the novel emphasized the questioning of past not only in the framework of offender but also victim reminiscences as an inevitable part of German identity. Grass, as a writer, aestheticizes the facts in the collective memory of German society with historical facts

in narrating the case of the Pofriefke family in his novel. In the novel, historical facts are revived in the context of semi-autobiographical as well as semi-fictional elements. In Grass's novel, the viewpoint of three generations from one family about the history is communicated to the reader. Konny, a member of third generation (the grandchild generation), developed his thought as being the victim in the past and adopted the identity that his grandmother passed to him and thus, the communication and memory transfer by first generations to the third generation lead to a family tragedy. In addition, Paul's silence about his past events and his distant attitude in relation to his son make Konny to do mistakes. Konny became victim of his grandmother and father while questioning the past and history.

Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present (Hirsch 106-107).

Therefore, according to Hirsch the novel highlights the fact of building and developing the thoughts of postmemory, based on the experiences of the witnessing generation, in the individual from grandchildren generation who lack an individual bond and own memories about past. Unlike the second generation, the representatives of the third generation are far from the emotional dimension of the past and they develop their thoughts into action by owning the family biographies.

Conclusion

As it is known, the period before and after World War II caused great sociological breaks in Germany. Present study is aimed to analyse generation memory which is a part of collective memory to understand the political and

sociological breaks in the society. An investigation is made on this postmodern novel, in which real historical events are used as main theme, to describe how a new perspective on history is presented in the novel along with the style of communication and narration of the conclusions to the readers. Moreover, the study also tries to find how the history is transmitted between generations through individual's memories and what kind of outcomes might be faced by next generations. Besides, the study also tries to address the reasons of highlighting the memory space in the events taken place during recent history through the incident of Wilhelm Gustloff ship in the novel "Crabwalk" of Günter Grass, one of the post-war first-generation writers of German literature.

Günter Grass is a writer who witnessed both the Hitler era during the war and development period of Germany. Therefore, as an individual of German society and conscious of being part of the identities of the past, Grass fictionalises the past through his recollection figures based on personal and collective memory in his novels. The author explored how the past was conveyed between generations by expressing and interpreting the issues through literary work that are considered as taboos in the societies. Grass penned down his novel by referring to the sources of cultural memory based on experiences of his own generation. He narrates the events of 1945 and later years based not only on historical encyclopaedic knowledge in the novel, but also the memoirs of his family album. Thus, the author reveals the events of the war years, revives the past and presents a different perspective to the official history.

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