



Hunger Trauma in Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel*

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Abstract:

*The article attempts to look at how hunger can be treated as a traumatic experience (trauma) and how this trauma is represented in fiction. The analysis focuses on Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel* (2012, originally published in Germany in 2009) in which the discussion of various excerpts from the novel shows that hunger trauma is represented as having effect on both the body and the mind although the psychological effect seems to be emphasised more than the bodily one. The effect on the body is expressed only through some references to diseases that the deportees in the sick barrack are down with and short descriptions of human beings as genderless objects or shells (skin and bones) that are left after continuous starvation. The psychological effect is revealed through more varied means of representation of hunger. The hunger angel is used as a recurrent image and an evil figure who is to blame for the hunger experienced by Leopold, the protagonist, in the labour camp. The use of eating/hunger words, imaginary eating of smoke and mind tricking are the main strategies to overcome trauma for Leopold. A long lasting traumatic effect is re-presented through repetitive dreams about re-deportation after sixty years since Leopold's return home.*

Key words: representation of (hunger) trauma, literary trauma studies, trauma fiction, post-traumatic symptoms, twofold effect of hunger.

Introduction and Historical Background

Traumatic experiences of the WWII period that are usually discussed in fiction and non-fiction are usually related

to war traumas, whether they are physical, e.g. lost limbs, or psychological, e.g. horrible traumatic images that haunt the traumatised. Both kinds of traumas leave traces in one's life and remind of themselves later. What the present paper intends to discuss is the topic of hunger that could be classified under both categories of trauma mentioned above, since it affects both the body and the mind. On the one hand, hunger that was experienced by people in forced labour camps during or after WWII can be seen as a physical trauma because of its effect on people's physical well-being. On the other hand, lack of food caused psychological problems not only during the period of imprisonment in the camps, but also after it, thus haunting the victims.

According to Danutė Gailienė and Evaldas Kazlauskas “[i]n terms of *scientific research*, the denial of and ambivalence towards the crimes of communism create a major imbalance: while a great deal of research has been done into the traumatic experiences of Holocaust and Second World War victims and of members of anti-Nazi resistance movements, there has been little research into trauma in post-communist countries, and the former Soviet republics in particular” (Gailienė and Kazlauskas 2005, 72, italics in original). Thus, the present paper is an attempt to start filling this void by looking at hunger trauma caused by deportation to a Soviet forced labour camp described in Herta Müller's novel *The Hunger Angel*. The novel has been selected for the analysis in order to find out how the above mentioned twofold traumatic experience of hunger is represented in literature, since it is not broadly discussed.

The Hunger Angel is based on real life experiences but not of Müller (b. 1953) herself. It is the end of WWII, 15 January 1945, when the protagonist Leopold Auberg, a seventeen year-old German-Romanian, is taken by the Russians because he is on their list and is brought to work in a Soviet labour camp. As Leopold says in the novel, no people in the camp participate in any war, but they are Germans, so the Russians see them “guilty of Hitler's crimes” (Müller 2012, 36).

In the "Afterword", Müller provides the following historical background in order to locate the story of the novel in a certain historical time and context of Romania:

By the summer of 1944 the Red Army had advanced deep inside Romania; the Facist dictatorship was overthrown, and its leader, Ion Antonescu, was arrested and later executed. Romania surrendered and in a surprise move declared war on its former ally, Nazi Germany. In January 1945 the Soviet general Vinogradov presented a demand in Stalin's name that all Germans living in Romania be mobilized for "rebuilding" the war-damaged Soviet Union. All men and women between seventeen and forty-five years of age were deported to forced-labor camps in the Soviet Union. (Müller 2012, 287)

Thus, this background information helps the reader understand the political context of the time and why the protagonist is taken to the forced labour camp, in which the major part of the story takes place.

According Siobhan Parkinson, at first Müller intended to write a book together with a poet Oscar Pastior, who had been a prisoner in a Soviet camp (Parkinson 2012, 1). However, he died in 2006 and Müller wrote it alone (Parkinson 2012, 1; Müller 2012, 288). What brought her attention to experiences of the Soviet labour camp survivors was probably her mother who had spent five years in one of such camps (Parkinson 2012, 1), but the novel is not her mother's story. It "is based on a series of interviews with labour camp survivors, and particularly with a German-Romanian poet, Oscar Pastior" since her mother chose not to speak about her traumatic experiences (Parkinson 2012, 1).

Trauma, Traumatic Symptoms and Translation of Trauma in Fiction

Danutė Gailienė claims that at present the word "trauma" is used to refer to pretty much any unpleasant or disturbing event, like job loss or divorce, not to mention

physical injuries,” but “in diagnostic manuals like DSM a trauma is only an event that is beyond the usual experience of people’s lives and could potentially harm any person” (Gailienė 2008, 222). She provides the following examples of trauma: “natural and human disasters, serious accidents, witnessing other people’s death or becoming a victim of torture, terrorism, rape or other crime” (Gailienė 2008, 222). All of these traumatic events are “death threatening or otherwise related to death” (Gailienė 2008, 222). Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman states that “‘trauma’ [is] a word applied at present to almost any severe disturbance, [and] comes from two sources”: “[t]he first emphasizes the closeness of the cause (traumatic incident) and effect (physical trauma)” (Hartman 2004, 3). He continues by saying that “overwhelming power always produces the same effect, which is to turn you into a helpless subject – whether in domestic situations, war, or natural disasters” (Hartman 2004, 3).

As Kirby Farrell has it, post-traumatic symptoms that are common to the traumatised in the real world and are depicted in fiction as well are the following: (haunting) traumatic memories, nightmares, disorganised actions, the idea of meaningless life, depression, numbness, alienation, aggression, fear, panic and loss of control (Farrell 1998, p. 6). However, whatever the reactions to traumatic events are, they are “normal reactions to abnormal events” (Gailienė 2008, 223). As far as forced labour camp experiences are concerned, Dalia Kuodytė states that because of “terrible conditions of the life and the work, they [camp prisoners] were afflicted not only by physical but also by mental and emotional exhaustion, where the only goal was to survive” (Kuodytė 2005, 19). Therefore, trauma could be defined as a disturbing experience in one way or another related to death and is caused by an event that is outside normal/usual human experience. The effect of traumatic experience can be physical and/or psychological and is observed through a variety of post-traumatic symptoms.

According to Barbara Arizti, “[r]epetition concerning language, imagery or plot is one of the commonest strategies for translating trauma into narrative” (Arizti 2011, 177). Anne Whitehead expresses the same idea by saying that fiction “mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression” (Whitehead 2004, 86). What is more, “[s]ince writing is an act of remembrance, when the past has been especially marginalized and marked by oppressive forces, then the literary discourse turns into a source of restoration and regeneration” (Vega-Gonzalez 2004, 7). Thus, in her novel, Müller chooses to employ a hunger angel as a recurrent image of traumatising hunger in the labour camp of the Soviet Russia. Further discussion will show how hunger trauma is represented in order to “help readers to access traumatic experiences” (Vickroy 2002, 1) and whether both the physical and the psychological effects are used to represent such trauma in Müller’s novel.

Hunger Trauma in *The Hunger Angel*

As the title of Müller’s novel indicates, she dedicates her primary attention to hunger. Moreover, hunger is described as a personified hunger angel. It is introduced for the first time on page eight and is mentioned continually in the novel. Before that, the main character speaks of chronic hunger that probably leads to the birth of the hunger angel. However, angels usually are not portrayed as causing traumatic experiences. On the contrary, angels are seen as those providing protection and helping, not as taking away food from the hungry like it is in Müller’s novel. At the very beginning of the novel, Leopold Auberg, the narrator, speaks about hunger as follows:

No words are adequate for the suffering caused by hunger. To this day I have to show the hunger that I escaped his [the hunger angel’s] grasp. Ever since I stopped having to go hungry, I literally eat life itself. And when I eat, I am locked

up inside the taste of eating. For sixty years, ever since I came back from the camp. I have been eating against starvation. (Müller 2012, 18)

Although it is the beginning of the novel and the reader is given a glimpse into the end of the story that suggests the narrator's survival, the novel does not become less interesting to read. In fact, the beginning introduces the haunting effect of hunger trauma that is present even after sixty years and indicates the importance of hunger in the novel at the same time. It also tells the reader that the narrator reflects on his experiences after many years. Later, starting on page 76, there is even a whole chapter on the hunger angel, providing more details about it. Leopold refers to the angel by saying that "[t]he hunger angel climbs to the roof of [his] mouth and hangs his scales" since one shovel load is worth one gram of bread (Müller 2012, 77). The angel is also referred to as "open[ing] your pores and crawl[ing] in" or "approach[ing] everyone without restraint" (Müller 2012, 31,74). It is seen as something being everywhere and affecting everyone in the camp. On the other hand, it does not necessarily mean that the hunger angel is some mystical figure that the narrator sees. It might as well be that identification and description of the hunger angel is a way to find something/someone who is to blame for the hunger the narrator experiences and an attempt to give, to a certain extent, a (rational) explanation to himself of what was happening in the camp. Consequently, identification of the hunger angel could be seen as a psychological strategy to cope with hunger trauma.

Psychological strategies to cope with hunger trauma are needed because hunger is portrayed as affecting one's psychological state. When telling about Karli Halmen who stole Albert Gion's (both of them were deportees in the camp) bread and thus was beaten up badly by other camp prisoners, Leopold states that "the hunger angel is also a thief who steals the brain" and thus makes people act the way they otherwise would

not (Müller 2012, 104). This metaphorical brain loss could also be illustrated by Leopold's behaviour as well. One day he accidentally finds 10 rubles and spends the money on food. He buys a lot of different kinds of food and eats everything straight away. It is not surprising that after his hunger diet it is a shock to his digestive system. He starts feeling sick and reflects on his experiences in the following way: "I felt so bad about wasting all the expensive food that I cried even as I threw up" (Müller 2012, 132). However, all he and others can think about is food.

I [Leopold] looked at the orach that could no longer be eaten and tried to think about something else – about the last tired warmth of late summer, before the ice-winter came. But instead I thought about the potatoes we didn't have. (Müller 2012, 18)

Although Leopold tries to trick his mind, he is not successful, since hunger reminds of itself and pushes his thoughts towards thinking of food. Furthermore, one day Leopold watches Karli Halmen, a camp prisoner, eating sand and crying at the same time. It reminds Leopold of his childhood, and he expresses his memories as follows:

As a child I'd take a peach and bite into it, he said, then I'd drop it on the ground so it would land where I'd bitten. Then I'd pick it up and eat the sandy spot and drop it again. Until all that was left was the pit. My father took me to the doctor because I wasn't normal, because I liked the taste of sand. Now I have more than enough of sand and can't remember what a peach looks like at all. (Müller 2012, 120)

It sounds like a paradox that in his childhood Leopold ate sand even though food was available, whereas in the camp, the food is not available but he can get as much sand as he could eat although he does not have a wish for it anymore. Such flashbacks from the past make it more difficult to survive hunger because they remind of the opportunities that were not taken in the past. Moreover, the events in the past were not

traumatic, but when they are remembered in the camp, the memories start acquiring a traumatic psychological effect.

One more means of representation of hunger in *The Hunger Angel* and coping with it is words. People in the camp are described as so hungry that they invent a certain practice of using certain words indicating food items instead of eating actual food, since it is not available. According to the narrator, “[h]unger words make up a map, but instead of reciting countries in your head you list names of food. Wedding soup, mincemeat, spare ribs, pig’s knuckles, roast hare, liver dumplings, haunch of venison, hasenpfeffer, and so on” (Müller 2012, 148). Leopold expands on the hunger words by saying that

All hunger words are also eating words, you picture the food in front of your eyes and feel the taste in your mouth. Hunger words, or eating words, feed your imagination. They eat themselves, and they like what they eat. You never get full, but at least you’re there for the meal. Every person with chronic hunger has his preferred eating words, some rare, some common, and some in constant use. Each person thinks a different word tastes best. [...] Everyone eats his words by himself although we’re all eating together. (Müller 2012, 148-149)

A similar strategy to overcome hunger is to eat smoke or smell. Although it is not actual eating, it seems that this imaginary eating helps Leopold to survive as well. He describes it in the following way:

When I had nothing to cook, the smoke snaked through my mouth. I drew in my tongue and chewed on nothing. I swallowed my spit with the evening smoke and thought about bratwurst. When I had nothing to cook, I walked close to the pots and pretended I was on my way to brush my teeth at the well before going to bed. But by the time I put the toothbrush in my mouth I’d already eaten twice. First I ate the yellow fire with the hunger of my eyes and then the smoke with the hunger of my mouth. (Müller 2012, 24)

Despite the temporary comfort of hunger words, imaginary eating and their positive psychological effect on the narrator and other people in the labour camp, these strategies of coping with hunger trauma do not seem to have the same (positive) effect on human body. Leopold thinks that because of hunger “men and women lose all difference, and lose all sexual drive,” and “[h]alf-starved humans are really neither masculine nor feminine but genderless, like objects” (Müller 2012, 149). Moreover, those readers who know the symptoms of various diseases that deportees are down with in the “sick barrack” (Müller 2012, 140) know the effect on the body as well although it is not expressed directly. Later on, the effect on human body is stated directly, for example, deportees have “shiveled gums with decayed and missing teeth” (Müller 2012, 140). As a result, one’s body becomes a reflection or a marker of the traumatic experience of hunger. At the same time, one’s body is seen as the reason why s/he is in the camp in the first place. In the next excerpt Leopold reflects on the human body.

What is there to be ashamed of when you no longer have a body. Yet our bodies were the reason we were in the camp, to perform bodily labor. The less body we had, the more it punished us. The shell that was left belonged to the Russians. (Müller 2012, 224)

The shell that Leopold refers to is the body that is left after continuous starvation and hard labour. “When you’re nothing but skin and bones and in bad shape yourself, you do what you can do to keep the dead at a distance,” Leopold thinks to himself (Müller 2012, 79). Thus, the described effect is not yet seen as the worst effect of this traumatic experience. Death that is everywhere is the one that is left to resist, but resisting hunger helps to resist death as well.

In 1950 Leopold is able to return home. However, he has to get used to or even re-learn some things he has forgotten during the years spent in the camp. One of such things is the use of cutlery that he describes in the following way:

I had forgotten how to eat with a knife and a fork. My hands twitched, and so did my throat when I swallowed. I knew how to go hungry, how to make food last, and how to wolf it down when you finally have some. But I no longer knew how to eat politely, how long to chew, and when to swallow. My father sat across from me, and our tabletop seemed as big as half the world. He squinted as he watched me and hid his pity. The horror shone in his half-closed eyes just like the rose-quartz skin inside his lip. My grandmother understood better than anyone how to be kind to me without making a fuss. She made soup that was extra thick, probably so I wouldn't have to agonize over knives and forks. (Müller 2012, 263)

Having had to save food, Leopold comes back home with different eating habits than he left with. Therefore, he does not feel comfortable while eating together with his family anymore. He notices how different he has become and sees his father's reaction to his changed eating habits, but at the same time Leopold cannot change them back and act as if he did not experience what he did. In addition to this, he has repetitive dreams that can be perceived as nightmares, since they are about deportation and constantly remind him of this traumatic experience: "And sixty years later I dream: I've been deported for the second, or sometimes even the seventh time" (Müller 2012, 227). In such a way, the traumatic experiences have a haunting effect that never disappears. When Leopold is awake, hunger haunts him and he cannot stop eating, but when he is asleep, he has no peace either, since he has constant dreams about being deported to the camp where he experienced hunger for five years. He cannot comprehend these dreams dreams. Below are his ideas that show an attempt to understand them.

In which camp did my dream end up. Does my dream even care that the heart-shovel and the slag cellar really existed. That the five imprisoned years are more than enough for me. Does my dream want to go on deporting me and then refuse to let me work when I reach the seventh camp. That really hurts. I have nothing to counter with, no matter how many times the

dream departs me and no matter which camp I end up in.
(Müller 2012, 227)

As Cathy Caruth claims, “intrusive hallucinations, dreams [and] thoughts” of such kind are common to the traumatised (Caruth 1995, 4). Such dreams can be seen as one of post-traumatic symptoms and interpreted literally, because they repeat the same traumatising event or experience. In this case, it was deportation to the forced labour camp in which constant hunger was experienced. Even after many years since the return home the experienced trauma has a long lasting effect. Although when Leopold returns home, he is able to eat everything he wants, the camp, or even the hunger angel, has left marks not only on Leopold’s body, but also on his mind and behaviour. He reflects on eating in the following manner:

Even sixty years after the camp, eating still excites greatly. I eat with each pore of my body. When I eat with other people I become unpleasant. I behave as though my way of eating were the only way. The others don’t know mouth happiness, they eat sociably and politely. But when I eat, I think about the onedroptoomuchhappiness and how it will come to everyone [...], and we’ll have to give up the nest in our skull, the swing in our breath, the pump in our chest, the waiting room in our stomach. I love eating too much that I don’t want to die, because then I couldn’t eat anymore. (Müller 2012, 237)

The haunting effect of hunger that is introduced at the very beginning of the novel acquires a greater significance at the very end of it when, after telling the story about traumatising experience in the labour camp, examples of the effect on Leopold’s life back home are given. However, earlier (in the camp) eating was a means to an end (survival), while after leaving the camp it becomes the end itself, since it becomes eating for the sake of eating. It probably becomes the eating to compensate all the missed meals while being a camp prisoner, since “every one of us is ruled by our hunger, as though by alien power” (Müller 2012, 218).

Conclusions

The article discussed representation of hunger in Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel*. Hunger was treated as a trauma that, using Hartman's definition, comes from two sources, namely a traumatic event and its effect (Hartman 2004, 3). The analysis focused on both the physical and the psychological effect of hunger that was caused by deportation to one unidentified Soviet labour camp. The narrator, Leopold, tells about this experience after sixty years since his return from the camp.

The psychological effect seems to be to be given more importance than the bodily one in the novel. First of all, Leopold introduces a hunger angel as a recurrent image in his story about traumatic experience and as the one who tortured him and made it difficult to overcome hunger in the camp. It seems that it becomes easier for him when he has something/someone that he can blame for his suffering. Secondly, in the camp Leopold uses such psychological strategies to cope with hunger trauma as eating hunger words or imaginary eating of smoke instead of actual food and mind tricking although the latter can be said to be the least effective. Thirdly, the most important is probably the long lasting traumatic effect that is represented through repetitive dreams about re-deportation. The trauma changes the narrator's eating habits and behaviour as well.

There are very few descriptions of human body that would show direct effect of hunger. The effect on the body is expressed only through several references to diseases that the deportees in the sick barrack are down with and short descriptions of human beings as genderless objects, since the appearance of men and women becomes similar, or shells (skin and bones) that are left after continuous starvation.

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