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Identities Interplay of an Artist: Herta Müller

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Abstract: The Nobel Prize winner for literature, Herta Müller, represents a special case of an artist that deserves attention as it reflects how art can be an instrument of cultural diplomacy, especially in the sense of being an expression of overcoming dichotomies of East and West and cultivate transnational identities. Multiple, overlapping, fluid and contradictory (political) identities of the artist generate a special narrative that seeks to integrate and to find coherence for a world composed of paradoxical "inclusions" and "exclusions".

The article intends to reveal the subjective interplay of political realities within the artist's consciousness and the literary expressions of a schizoid political universe in searching for a subjective coherence.

Keywords: national identity, ethnic identity, transnational identities, cultural diplomacy, international system.

Introduction: how it feels to live in a totalitarian regime

The literary universe of Herta Müller, for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2009, "depicts the landscapes of the dispossessed" and "deals with the experience of oppression, of exile and of conforming to family and state."[ii] In the presentation of her biography on the official web site of the Nobel Prize it is mentioned that in 1979 she was approached by the Romanian secret police (Securitate), but she refused to spy on her colleagues and foreign guests, and as a result she lost her job and could only find occasional employment.[iii] The consequences of her refusal to cooperate with the communist oppressive apparatus were described in many of her works, including in her Nobel lecture: "*Every word knows something of a vicious circle.*" In the Romanian translation the *"vicious circle"* becomes the *"devils circle"* as the moral purpose of the state[iv] to protect its citizens is perverted and the state produces the main aggressive tools against its citizens. Then they must rely on a *handkerchief to find affection.*

> *Love disguised itself as a question - do you have a handkerchief?*[v]

The theme of the fundamental contradiction, the state who is supposed to protect its citizens becomes the main perpetrator of violence (the issue highlighted by the human security paradigm) is expressed in Herta Müller's book title"*Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*". The replacement and confusion of "natural" roles are expressed in many ways and here are some examples: *"the fox is the hunter*", "*the car is looking for the pits in the street*", "*face without face*", "*voice without voice, so nobody listens, the cut said*", "*and this too is a contradiction, and contradictions connect themselves*", "*white-black sky*", „*we should bite, chew, swallow and close the eyes untill the quince moves from hand into stomach...to be somebody who never eats a quince*", "*...it's a contradiction as well that ordinary men and ordinary women meet on the streets of the town and scary the son of the dead man because, instead of asking him 'how are you' they ask 'how is your life.'*"(Müller 2009)

The absurd of life is portrayed in images as such "*the tailor-woman spoke the whole summer about the legless hen. She was saying, I had to cut it, it was like a child*" (Müller 2009, 138)

Herta Müller confess: "*I do not understand the world. That is why I write, because I do not understand the world...literature too is a way of searching...we are all a mystery, even in our body...Alongside all this*

existential problems, which automatically concern us all, the dictatorship introduced political surveillance that you have to fight against ...all I have understood is that freedom is important." "Literature is paradoxically born out of your belief that there is a disconnect between thoughts and words...you start writing precisely at the moment when you believe that words have lost their power."[vi]

The subject of the Romanian totalitarian regime during Ceausescu's time and the dictatorship is but a part of the coin, a variant of putting the finger on the structures and agents of violence. Finding the guilty ones in specific places, be those places called Romania, is misguiding. It is a mistake, as well, to speak about a collective guilt and to raise the question why in Romania was no consistent dissidence, loosing from sight the many political prisoners who died in prison after the Second War World for opposing the communists that had to put in place the utopian ideas of equality or social justice.

As the history can't be explained by cutting pieces from time and space, what happened in Romania can't be explained in simple terms. Romania is but an example of the atrocities people can do to people. And history has a lot to say about that. There is a combination of factors to be invoked in searching for answers. As Herta Müller speaks in her Nobel lecture, we find combinations of paradoxical realities that divide *us* from *them,* yet we need to find coherence and integration principles.

"For my grandmother this photo was a combination, too: on the white handkerchief was a dead Nazi, in her memory was a living son. My grandmother kept this double picture inside her prayer book for all her years. She prayed every day, and her prayers almost certainly had double meanings as well. Acknowledging the break from beloved son to fanatic Nazi, they probably beseeched God to perform the balancing act of loving and forgiving the Nazi."

In fact we must know to ask the right question. *"Can it be that the question about the handkerchief was never about the handkerchief at all, but rather about the acute solitude of a human being?"[vii]*

International system and a cynical *realpolitik*

Theory of international relation, as a search for causes of harm in world history, appeals to many theoretical constructs in order to identify the adequate key of approaching the subject. Kenneth Waltz (2006, 70) assumes that a theory of international politics must be a theory of the international system. Barry Buzan and Richard Little consider, as well, that international system represents the key of the entire academic discipline of International Relations. (Buzan & Little 2009, 15) Many other authors are interested in the concept of international system as being the proper one to bring a holistic explanation for historical facts and events (e.g. Reus-Smit 1999, Legro 2005, Philpott 2001, Clark 2007, Ikenberry 2001, Watson 2005, Hall 1999, Hurd 2007)

Edward Hallett Carr (1939) wrote about the link between the realism, as theory of international relations, and utopianism, stating that realism without utopianism may degenerate into a cynical "*realpolitik*". A consequent realism excludes four things which seem to represent the essential ingredients for any efficient political reflection: a fundamental aim, an emotional appeal, the right for a moral judgment and a base for action. The antithesis between realism and utopianism is similar to antithesis as those between wish and determinism, theory and practice, intellectualism and bureaucratic or ethics and politics. (Griffiths, Roach and Solomon 2009, 11).

From this perspective, the lessons of the Cold War, when the term "strategy" had become synonym with politics, reflect what E.H. Carr envisaged as cynical politics. And Herta Müller reflects in her writing, from our point of view, how it feels when a society descends into a cynical *realpolitik.* As constructivists are searching the constitutive causes for a social phenomena and formulate questions in a different manner, in the logic of how facts where made possible or legitimized especially during the Cold War, in the logic of managing international relation using the concept of spheres of influence or radical evil, we may state that the communist "work of art" in Eastern European countries may be seen, as well, as a consequence of "purist" identities construction based on the dyad Ego – Alter, friend – enemy, and insistence on differentiation.

Using the words of Herta Müller, the cynical power politics may be illustrated as such: "Objects deceive with their materials, the gestures don't know their feelings and words don't know the mouth that speaks them". Moreover "if you live with death threats, you need friends…so you have to risk that they might spy on you". So everything is divided. "Every word in your face knows something of the vicious circle but doesn't say it"

Kenneth Waltz, the neorealist key figure, analyses in his book *"Man, the State and War",* the three images where the cause of war should be sought: the individual level, in the political units or in the international system. The IR neorealist theoretician appreciates that anarchy represents the condition of the international system which explains and "justify" certain political options.

Alexander Wendt (2006), deconstructing the argument promoted by Kenneth Waltz in his book *Theory of International Politics*, proposes the *Social Theory of International Politics* and the assumption that "anarchy is what states make of it". It is, after all, an (individual) option to identify with the Alter or to adopt a strategy for portraying the Other as a friend or an enemy. From a constructivist point of view, structures are nothing more than politicized inter-subjective theories and ideas.

Herta Müller has experienced the effects of a totalitarian political regime which was justified in terms of "defense and national security" in an anarchic international arena, as realists put it, finally confounded with the "security of the ruling class". Everything was permitted as there was no place for morality, only for winners and losers. The national interest often was opposed to others' national interests and on the front of total strategies, the subversive strategies specific to Cold War, left the people out of humanity living with suspicious minds that every friend might be an informer and the interested friendship was entertained in order the security apparatus to get access to the supposed secret plans of all others potential enemies. "I couldn't cope with perfidy…when everyone is saying you are an informer!"In an international system created on the division between "internals" and "externals", on the competition of Super Powers, Romania was but one example of the realist consequences of total strategies of war, be it named "cold". Paranoid personalities of the totalitarian regime saw risks and threats everywhere, especially they targeted non-Romanian individuals and to defined them as internal enemies. The procedure was characteristic for an international order based on legitimized homogenous nation-state political units. In the eyes of the totalitarian regime Herta Müller was a typical person who had to suffer from having the profile of the perfect internal stranger, a guild doubled by the fact that her father was a member of the Hitler Waffen-SS.

Constructing European Union identity

European Union Institute for Security Studies has recently released a book entitled *Towards and EU Global Strategy* (Missiroli 2015) having the intention to launch a broad consultation on the necessity for crafting a genuinely common EU global strategy. In the preface of the book, Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, insists on the key word „common", a common European role in the world and a common vision.

The European Security Strategy elaborated in 2003 has proposed the concepts of human security, comprehensive security and multilaterallism, yet the concepts are considered too vague for being a usefull instrument for guiding political options. The post-Cold War discourse about "security", especially the new paradigm of human security in its broad definition, is attacked in the idea of not being intellectual coherent, for losing its sense, as it may encompass everything and overloading the agenda of security risks, from local to global. (Booth 1997, 110-111) The paradigm of human security signals the multiple problems the people have to face and the fact that the political answers are hard to find.

From a constructivist perspective, in order to succeed in creating a common European vision, especially on sensitive matters of defense and security, it is necessary to create a unified European identity. The constructivist statement that who we are, how we understand ourselves, determines our interests, especially our "political" interests, the topic of the article, the identities interplay of an artist, has major relevance.

Herta Müller's combination of identities and the way she understand herself as a person (*"every person is a unique individual in the world and has a unique relationship with that world")* may be an extraordinary

example of an artist as diplomat, promoting a possible vision of how it may be crafted a European identity of a person, as a combination of multiple identities and cultural features.

Identifying Herta Müller as being European

In the current European and international context, it would be a mistake to try to count and establish someone's identities in exclusive terms, trying to find those characteristics that speak best of a preponderant national or ethnic color. Some things can't be accounted. It's a mistake to try to "classify" and speak about Herta Müller using sentences like "she is a Romanian-born writer" for, at least, the affirmation is incorrect (she lived for 34 years in Romania compared to the 28 years she has been living Germany, starting with 1987). Or to affirm that she "represents the German language" and belongs to German "culture" because she writes in German language, although she has written in Romanian language, too, it is a superficial attitude, at best, and ethnocentric. The emphasis on presenting Herta Müller as belonging, more or less, to a nation is better to be understood as a mean of "state" diplomacy or as a strategy of nation - branding, rather than an emancipated European discourse.

In the context of the current trend for building a stronger and a wider European Union, discourses that promote identities constructed on politicized "definitions" of the Self, even in such cases when multiple "identities" overlap, the tendency to simplify and "organize" the identity of a person, be it one of the most complex and introspective personality, would be politically incorrect and inopportune.

Herta Müller's personality is too complex to be analyzed using an old-fashioned vocabulary. She belongs, as well, to Romanian and to German cultural spaces, in the same time having a European and a universal personality. They specter of possibilities for her being perceived as a diplomat should not be limited to conventional "frameworks" and "definitions" which classify a person in terms of belonging or homeland. There are many people who may consider that Herta Müller represents them better than "the state officials" and that she is a true model.

Conclusions

There are many global challenges which require us to give answers and to be responsible for our options, but it seems that the only solution to plead for is integration and coherence for a world composed of paradoxical "inclusions" and "exclusions". Herta Müller represents a special case of an artist whose identities interplay and her literary universe may be a solution in our goal of making a better world, starting with understanding the place people should occupy in the world.

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[ii] http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/muller-facts.html

[iii] http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/muller-bio.html

[iv] I have in mind the book written by Christian REUS – SMIT, *The Moral Purpose of the State. Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1999*

[v] http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/muller-lecture_en.html

[vi] Gabriel Liiceanu, Herta Müller, *When personal integrity is not enough.* Herta Müller and Gabriel Liiceanu discuss language and dissidence, http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-05-26-mullerliiceanu-en.html

[vii] http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/muller-lecture_en.html