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A Unique Exile Scenario: Select Stories in *Nadirs* by Herta Müller

Dr. Preethamol M. K.

Associate Professor (English), Mar Ivanios College (Autonomous), Nalanchira P.O.,
Trivandrum – 695015, Kerala, India.

Affiliation: University of Kerala.

Email: preethamol.mk@mic.ac.in | Mobile: +91 9605486049

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Abstract

Herta Muller, the acclaimed German writer of Romanian origin and recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009 has in her oeuvre, works that carries the indelible mark of oppression and resistance. Her narrative trajectory reveals the experiences of an intellectual condemned to de facto exile before experiencing de jure exile under the Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu of Romania. This unique exile scenario has served her as a preamble to delineating discussions on exile, while remaining in spatial inner exile. Whether you are in exile physically or experiencing exile psychologically, the emotional roller coaster you are subjected to, remain the same, with alienation, displacement, dislocation and loss of homeland haunting you. Muller's prose speaks for her fractured inner self in exile where authoritarianism has made her life a lived reality in exile. Her writing transfers the trauma of dictatorship and the complex identity of someone caught between nations, languages and histories. The article titled A Unique Exile Scenario: Select Stories in *Nadirs* by Herta Muller proposes to do a study on select short stories from *Nadirs*, the autobiographical memoir on life under dictatorship that exemplifies how inner exile reveals traumatising times of violence, resistance, dispossession, surveillance and estrangement.

Key Words: authoritarian- trauma-exile -resistance -oppression.

Introduction

De facto is a Latin phrase which as an adjective means 'in fact', and in legal connotation it refers to something that does not exist in reality. The term is better understood when we contrast it with another Latin phrase de jure which means 'by law'. Both these closely connected terms are used in varied contexts to refer to standards concerning politics, law and war conditions. If the former refers to things related to reality, with no legal recognition, the latter has the backup and ratification of law. When it comes to individuals involved in war or war like scenarios, situations can duress individuals

to be in exile either de facto or de jure. Hence exile need not always be political or social, it can be voluntary too. Which brings us to an explanation to the term exile.

What is exile? It can be defined as a state of forced or voluntary absence from a country or place of residence. If this displacement happens to a writer voluntarily, and not by any legal enforcement, he or she can aptly be called as a writer in de facto exile. This is a condition of identifying a new location, which is theoretically not a space outside the physical boundaries of one's motherland, but within and inside one's inner self. Here there is no law forcing the writer to be away from one's own place of residence. Thus, there can be a lot of reasons behind why one chooses to be so, though the primary reason being unable to live peacefully and exercise intellectual rights without fear. A writer is forced to leave a place voluntarily because of coercive restrictions that makes living and working in homelands a mental struggle. The writers need not be living in a place at war, but war like intimidating situations similar to dictatorship would also be counted as being in war. This concept of inner exile reveals traumatising times of violence, resistance, dispossession, surveillance and estrangement which is similar to the experiences in those narratives about people in war and exile. This is specifically true in the case of many writers like James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Nabokov, Rushdie, Soyinka and so on to name a famed few.

Herta Muller, the acclaimed German writer of Romanian origin and the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009 is the perfect example for a writer who is condemned to de facto exile before experiencing de jure exile under the Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania. She was living in Romania and later left voluntarily for Germany. This unique exile scenario has served her as a preamble to delineating discussions on themes related to exile, while remaining in the space of inner exile. Whether you are in exile physically or experiencing exile psychologically, the emotional roller coaster you are subjected to, remain the same, with alienation, displacement, dislocation and loss of homeland haunting you. Herta Muller's prose speaks for her fractured inner self in exile where authoritarianism has made her life a lived reality in exile. Her writing transfers the trauma of dictatorship and the complex identity of someone caught between nations, languages and histories. She was an unknown figure among the academia and the general population when she received the Nobel Prize in 2009. This article titled A Unique Exile Scenario: Select Stories from *Nadirs* by Herta Muller places Muller's collective narrative especially *Nadirs* within the frame of exile literature where exile need not always be forced movement across the border. Muller diverges from the conventional concept of literary exile as is the case with renowned writers like Rushdie.

In Muller's life and writing, exile is inherently present as by way of portraying episodes which exemplify conditions that picture her as a stranger to the place where she lives. Her internal state of exile or de facto exile speaks about the feelings of oppression, estrangement, fear, surveillance, censorship, marginalisation, alienation and trauma which are similar to the experiences of those in physical or de jure exile.

Discussion

Herta Muller was born in Nitzkydorf, a German speaking village in the Banat region of Romania on August 17, 1953. She studied German and Romanian literature from the University of Timisoara. Meanwhile Communist dictatorship under Nicolae Ceausescu was slowly but surely getting advanced in Romania, resulting in multiple changes in government ownership to the place. Physical, mental and emotional harassment of the minorities residing in Romania was common. After leaving her studies, Muller joined as a translator in an engineering factory in Romania. Alongside, being interested in writing and reading literature, she joined Aktionsgruppe Banat- Banat Action Group, a group of German and Romanian writers who fought for literature in German. They were against the oppressive dictatorship of Ceausescu and the literature of the ruling party. Unfortunately, her life turned tough once she refused to act as an informer and a collaborator to the Romanian secret police,

the Securitate. She was terminated from her job and her life was under constant surveillance. She was oppressed and constantly monitored. But she turned this phase of her life to something productive and published ten books between 1984 and 1994. Considering her dozens of publications to date, her literary achievements carry the indelible mark of justice that fights for the portrayal of delineating justice into her signature style of high-quality poetic prose.

It was in 1982 that Muller's first collection of stories titled *Niederungen* was published. The work was highly censored and was also the first work by her to be translated to English as *Nadirs*. Muller went into exile to West Berlin in Germany in 1987. This was followed by a notable collection of works by Muller which consolidated her global reputation as a writer of fame. This ultimately won her the most coveted prize in the realm of literary harvest - the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009.

Nadirs, is the English translation of *Niederungen*, a collection of fifteen autobiographical stories written in German. It came out in a censored version in 1982 in Romania. In 1984 a complete edition of the same was published in Berlin. The story is set in rural Romania and talks about the life style of Danube Swabians. On reading the stories, we get the feeling of walking through the past life of Muller, and how it felt to grow up in a minority community under an oppressive regime. It is a child's description of an adult world, but the difference is that the narrative arc is very much that of an adult. The child in the stories learn to live with an uninteresting life. The stories illustrate in poetic prose how life is unfolding in a German speaking minority community in a laid-back village in Banat.

When we go through the stories in the collection, there is no element of happiness or hope that is evident in the behaviour of the characters pictured. The incidents described are devoid of a charm that we usually associate with the serenity and tranquillity of an idyllic village setting. The figures we meet in the stories reflect the dullness and fear inherent in a young girl on watching how life moves on in a terrifying and traumatic atmosphere. The mood is one of an impending doom that can strike you at any time. Though you are always on your guard, the feeling of unpleasantness and the thought that someone is always watching you is behind the deft structuring of Muller's language. But the readers will never for a moment think about leaving the enumeration of the child though the landscape of the language of the writer is bleak and dull.

The portrayal of dream like images in the canvas of a totalitarian landscape is Muller's way of expressing the trauma that she underwent. The emotions that she had experienced while in Romania is codified into words though most of it remains obscure to the readers. This is because, to her, language is an instrument that the dictatorship regime embodied which was part of her life for long. Hence it cannot be taken out of her personal history and cultural identity. Obscure metaphors and confusing word plays are her stylistic forte and she employs them very stylistically in her works as vehicles for reason and understanding. But it does not mean that the works of Muller are entirely autobiographical. The story provides us with deep insights into being part of a minor community, especially one in a dictatorship scenario. The simple aesthetics that we can feel in a language is absent in her evocative descriptions, which is greatly influenced by the blend of the Romanian and German cultures. The universe of Muller is fearful and frightening and she transfers it to her writings.

Nadirs, the title denotes the squalor and degradation of a village in every possible way- especially the moral and social sides. It can also denote the low-lying land geography of Banat. The title conveys the low moral of the inhabitants of the region, especially the spiritual and emotional nadirs the characters are subjected to. In a metaphorical sense, the title can be a deconstruction of the idealised notion of the homeland, where the fifteen stories cover multiple aspects of village life where reality is seen to be bordering on illusion. The fight that Muller wants to portray is between a rural (village) universe and a cosmic (dictatorship) universe. There is absolutely no mention of regime rule in the stories, but the backdrop of the stories is that of dictatorship and subsequent exiles. It is tough to negotiate through the language labyrinth of Muller. The readers should take an extra dive into mentally

equipping themselves to understand the language of Muller. To quote Sieglinde Lug, who wrote the afterword to *Nadirs* makes things clear to the readers in the following words:

Nadirs deals with the bleak world of Muller's childhood. The book does not have a plot in any conventional sense. It is the collection of a child's often nightmarish impressions of life in her village ... Muller has found imaginative expression for the horror of her life. And while she tells stories of her particular village, the conditions and images have universal appeal. (122)

A close look at some of the stories in the collection exemplifies how de facto exile is in no way different from de jure exile. The narratological approach in the stories is one of camouflage where feelings of oppression, estrangement, fear, surveillance, censorship, marginalisation, alienation and trauma are hidden in the cardinal tropes of the dysfunctional village life that is portrayed by Muller. The images pictured are symbolic in nature and there is a vast abyss between the real and the fantastic images that portray the horrors of a dictatorship regime.

Life in the rural village is a metaphor for de facto exile. That is, geographically though the writer is physically present in the village of Banat, exile is pictured as a mode of resistance against dictatorship. Being home is an exile experience where oppression forces people like Muller to be alienated from their environment. Let us check out different images connected with decay, dirt, disease, bodily distortion, violence, resistance, dispossession, surveillance, estrangement which suggests an overt detailing of exile to explore the trauma of totalitarianism regime in *Nadirs*. The narration superimposes the ordeal of living in one's homeland as an outsider. Thomas Cooper draws Muller's unique position in the following words:

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)

The crux of narration in the linguistic parameter of Muller is her narratological approach which is fragmented and where there is a thin line of separation between realism and magic realism. She was duly praised by the Nobel Committee as representing "with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the dispossessed".

In "The Funeral Sermon" the first short story in the collection *Nadirs*, common images which we associate with funeral is heavily indicted with exilic layers. The funeral is that of the narrator's father. But the readers along with the narrator feels sort of alienated from the funeral proceedings in the house. The story is replete with images of decay which is marked by the presence of tattered white flowers and flies dropping their maggots in flight. The atmosphere is rigidly oppressive and the image of the father lying in a coffin in the middle of the room surrounded by walls with pictures telling stories about various stages of his life is frightening. Most of the pictures are surreal and the narrator finds them to be false and everything around her reduces her to a state of mental and emotional exile where she is totally lost and speechless. She felt isolated and was unable to deliver a eulogy for her father. "Everybody was looking at me. I know that now I had to give a speech. Everybody was looking at me. I couldn't think of a single word. My eyes were rising to my head through my throat." (Muller 4) There is no one to share her emotional depression. She feels the people in the community to which she was a part of, has suddenly turned to be menacing and she feels as an exile in her own familiar surroundings. She feels the society is watching her and she is under surveillance. There are other images which signify corruption, war and moral decay in the community. The story ends with the narrator waking as though from a dream and things turning to normalcy. "The alarm clock rang. It was Saturday morning, five thirty." (Muller 5) The story is also a reminder that despite all the hardships, there is no escape from the truth of living in a state of emotional punishment.

In the short stories titled "The Swabian Bath" and "My Family", images from the perspective of a child about her family is surrealistically described. Exile is a condition of the mind where you need not be removed from your place of residence. In both the stories, a glimpse into the domestic lives of the members of the family of the narrator is hinted at. All the activities - be it bathing or while describing relationship politics - estranges the traditional concept of a filial environment. There is no interaction as by way of speech or action among the members of the family. The picture the readers get is one of forced silence. Repetition of action suggests being trapped and being stagnant in a spot from which there is no escape. This in turn points out to decay and lack of life which is a prominent feature in repressive governments. Repetition becomes the language of exile. Certain sentences and words like "The water is still hot", "The tub has a yellow ring", "soap", "water" (Muller 6) "My grandfather and my grandmother" (Muller 8) gets repeated and this throws light into the mechanical life being led by people in totalitarian countries. The members of the family are experiencing exile while being trapped in a state of no escape. The domestic imageries reduce the lack of involvement in things which are familiar and thus the narrator is trying to communicate to the reader how she feels exiled without moving away from a place. She feels a stranger to the daily routine happening in life and family without actually leaving home. The power of her language is strong enough to make the readers experience exile. Minimalism which is a feature of her stylistic writing is conveys the feeling of exile as a means of oppression.

The next story selected for analysis is "Nadirs". Unlike other short stories in the collection, this one is relatively long for a short story and in fact it comes under the category of a novella. The word literally means an area of flat land, beside sea or river or rather a low-lying land. The setting remains just like in the other stories, the Banat region in Romania and the narrative is about rural life from the standpoint of that of a child. Sieglinde Lug, the English translator of her work *Nadirs*, comments thus about the collection:

Nadirs deals with the bleak world of Muller's childhood ...The title not only refers to the geographical location of lowlands, but also reflects the oppressive atmosphere that overwhelms the child. Muller has found imaginative expression for the horror in her life. And while she tells stories of her particular village, the conditions and images have universal appeal (Muller 122).

"Nadirs" comes with a lot of imagery, often surreal which are surveys on themes of mental and physical distress under repressive rule. Most imageries are descriptions on lack of humanity in everyday life in the representative village of Banat under Ceauçescu's regime. Let's analyse some imageries from the story. "Kittens rocked to sleep", "butterflies impaled on pins who flutter themselves to death", "flies in the washbowl", (Muller 11). "dead dogs bent or stretched out and stiff and stinking under a swarm of flies", (Muller 16), "dead mouse" (Muller 20), slaughtering of ducks, dead dragonflies and frogs, snakes and pigs with their bellies torn out are recurring images which are visceral in nature. Description of funerals which happened in the village and bleak narratives about the occurrences in the village represent the silent brutalities the child had gone through while living in Banat.

The biggest advantage of employing metaphors is that abstract concepts can be conveyed in a sophisticated manner using them. Considering Muller, and her stay in Romania under dictatorship, she was never able to write about her true emotions about the traumatic rule. She was under constant threat and there was imminent danger to her life. Hence the best way available to her was to write under camouflage, as she desired to document her traumatic existence. She wished to keep on record about difficult times, about broken lives in a totalitarian condition, about the everyday life of a German minority. Haines and Marven, the editors of *Herta Muller*, records thus about what went into Muller's collage writing:

Herta Muller's works are rooted in her life and gain their force from the experience of resisting institutions intent on eliminating personal identity. Her reflections on the practice of writing and role of literature, takes the reader back to the ongoing biographically specific process that have shaped the writer in her. Writing for her, is a matter of psychological compulsion that emanates from trauma (Marven 16).

The next story is "Workday" which revels in fragmented images that connote a world in mental disarray. The narrative style is puzzling, but being exposed to Muller's figurative language, it is no surprise. The narration is that of the routine in a workday. But what captures our attention is the description which is haphazard and meaningless "...go to the kitchen, get into the bathtub, take the towel, wash up my face with it, take the comb, dry myself with it, take the tooth brush, comb my hair with it, take the sponge, brush my teeth with it" (Muller 119). This is a reflection of life under surveillance and perpetual fear. Leading a life like this the narrator is experiencing emotional exile without crossing borders. Fear has led the people going through life without any joy in a machine-like manner. Lack of communication has led to an alienated feeling where everything feels monotonous and which foretells no hope for future. Silence permeates the story and it is the language of exile.

Closely along the same lines is another story titled "The Street Sweepers". This story enumerates how loneliness can make you mad. The street sweeper can signify agents who are part of a surveillance culture. They are entrusted with the task of watching over others and the narrator feels claustrophobic to the extent of "Everything tumbles over" (Muller116). The feeling of political censorship experienced by the narrator while in Romania, thus by being subjected to self-exile is manifested in the story. Life has become almost impossible and the narrator feels isolate in her surroundings "They sweep out the light bulbs, they sweep the streets out of the town, they sweep the living out of the houses, they sweep thoughts out of my head, they sweep me from one leg to the other, they sweep the steps out of my walk" (Muller 115). Exile is hence not only physical but also emotional in that, detachment can turn you into a stranger to yourself.

Perhaps the only story in the collection which has a deliberate hint at being personal is "Black Park". This is the only story where what appears to be a dedication is hinted at with the words "For Richard" towards the end. Richard can refer to Richard Wagner, husband of Muller who was also an author from Romania. He had played an influential role in Muller's life and they had together migrated to Germany in 1987. The story portrays a sense of pressure that is typical of people under dictatorship regime. The narrator seems to be waiting for a familiar face who never come which denotes the absence of a companion in an atmosphere of emotional exile. "Forever believing that someone is coming, and then it's night time and too late for that visit." (Muller 117). The feeling of isolation is so terrible that life feels empty. You feel resigned to your fate, "Your friends have shadows in their hair and watch how sad you are and get used to it and resign themselves to it" (Muller 118). The emotional landscape is one of sadness but there is no way that an escape is in the offing. The feeling is that of exile, where emotional rupture, alienation and fear rule the world.

Conclusion

Franz Langhammer who wrote *German Writers in Exile* remarks thus about exile: "In German Literature, we refer to two kinds of exile or immigration: the inner immigration and the outer immigration. The question remains whether those who remained in a so called "inner immigration" were living more in hell than those who lived in "outer immigration"." In short, you do not need to be in another country to suffer being in exile. As for Muller, exile was a state of mind she had to undergo while living in her homeland of Romania. *Nadirs*, the autobiographical short story memoir on life under dictatorship exemplifies how inner exile reveals traumatising times of violence, resistance, dispossession, surveillance and estrangement which is similar to the experiences of those narratives about people in war and exile. *Nadirs* brings to relief the severe conditions of life in Romania under

stagnated dictatorship where people were exposed to the dreadfulness of communist dictatorship. The village represented in the collection is indicative of a rural universe or a microcosmic world which unfolds the reality of macrocosmic magnitude to demonstrate what is happening in the dictatorship regime of Ceausescu.

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