



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.3.,2016 (July-Sept. )

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**GUNTER GRASS'S *THE TIN DRUM* : THE KEEPER OF GERMAN NATION'S CONSCIENCE**

PATCHALA RAJESH

Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University



**ABSTRACT**

Gunter Grass the post war German author , the noble laureate in literature for the year 1999 and also the member of *Gruppe 47* , the influential literary group that created after second world war in Germany , to address the problems of the day. As a member of the group and an experienced person who indulged in war, able to write a story to confront the German society after war. The novel divided into three books each book consisting of different chapters . They are talking about pore-and during and Post war conditions. The book till now considered as the German conscience keeper. And it is Grass who succeeded in creating that notion of repentance and dealing with theme of guilt for the crimes they had done in the name of war. My paper trying to observe how Grass succeeded in making Germans to confront for their past, after second world war, through the novel *The Tin Drum*.

Keywords. Tin drum, Grass, Germany, repentance, Past.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Gunter Wilhelm Grass is the key figure in post war German literature, and also the noble laureate in 1999. The background to write the novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) is after the destructive war in Germany, an influential literary group called *Gruppe 47* was formed to address the problems of the day. Their goal was to inform and teach the German public about democracy after Hitler's era after World War II. 47 indicate the year of formation. The prominent writers in the group were Heinrich Boll, Martin Wasler, and one and only Gunter Grass. It is with this idea Gunter Grass composed the Post –war master piece in literature *The Tin Drum* , with which the German novel again put back into world literary scene. Grass was given the best prize for writing such a kind of novel by *Gruppe 47* just after reading two books of the novel, where it as divided into three books . With this little information we can understand the worthy of its consideration in the Post –war era. The background for composing the novel as observed by Soren Frank in *Migration and Literature*, 'The seeds for the novel *The Tin Drum* can be found in a long, but unsuccessful poem that was written in 1952 during Grass's stay in France. The poem is of generic importance to the novel because it represents the first step toward Grass's creation of a displaced perspective. The poem was about a young existentialist bricklayer who became disillusioned with worldly developments. His reaction was to build a pillar in the centre of his small town, subsequently chaining himself to the top of the pillar. With this idea, Grass established a distance in perspective, but the elevated perspective was also too static.(37) He continues "On his way to home from France, Grass passed through Switzerland, where he met Anna his wife for the first time. The event that comes

to play a major literary role in the creation of *The Tin Drum*, however, occurs when Grass, among coffee-drinking adults, spots a three-year-old boy with a tin drum: "What struck me and stayed with me was the three-year-old's self-forgetful concentration on his instrument, his disregard of the world around him". The episode remains buried in Grass's memory for three years (37). Soren Frank continued to tell us about the composition of the novel stated "Having moved to Paris in 1956, Grass began working on the novel that eventually became *The Tin Drum*. Three versions ended up in the stove, however, just as Grass oscillated between different working titles such as "The Drummer," "The Tin Drum," and "Oskar, the Drummer." (37) Grass's own experiences in his life played a vital role in composing the novel. His direct experience with Nazi army and his father's association with Nazi people, and the incidents that taken place during war played a vital role in composing the novel. Grass's novels are set in the place called Danzig, and his first three novels are known as famous Danzig Trilogy, which includes *Tin Drum* (1959), *Dog Years* (1961), *Cat and Mouse*(1963). *The Tin Drum*, divide into three book, Pre-war , War, post –war respectively, gives an account of Oskar's Danzig Requiem, revealing ordinary people's willing embrace of the Nazi-regime and rendering day-to-day life under the Nazis. The development of this book mainly based on triangle love between the Protagonist' Oskar's German father, Danzig mother Agnes and his Polish Uncle Jan Bronski. The triangle relationship is a miniature of the political tussle between German, Danzig, and Poland which forecasts the outbreak of World War I. The second book is pervaded by the presence of death, in which Oskar loses Jan Bronski, his presumptive father Alfred, his lover Roswitha the Neapolitan somnambulist his neighbour mother Truczinskietc during the war. At the end of the book II Oskar begins to grow, because the growth in his body as like other humans was stopped in an incident. Book III dwells on Oskar's attempt to integrate him into a new, adult, bourgeois life in post-war times. He witnesses the German people, after the destructive war and Nazism, experiencing a crippled emotion. Wolfgang Mommsen in his article titled as "Historian's Dispute" he states that 'during the first years which followed the Nazi's defeat, the German public tended not to discuss the Nazi –past or to confront it only partially". But Grass speciality lies in his novels deals directly with the problem of remembering the unmasterable past and articulates the deadlock conditions of the 1950s. Soren Frank in *Migration and Literature* talking about *Tin Drum* "*The Tin Drum* consists of two levels of action and one level of narration. The first level of action takes place outside the asylum and takes the form of Oskar's autobiography unfolding from the story of the conception of Agnes in October 1899 until Oskar's arrest in Paris on his twenty-eighth birthday in September 1952. Oskar completes the writing of this story line on his thirtieth birthday in the beginning of September 1954. The second level of action takes place in the asylum and spans the period from the end of 1954, when Oskar decides to write his memoirs, until his thirtieth birthday. This level of story is written in the style of a diary, and the narrated events include the conversations with, and descriptions of, his visitors, Bruno, Klepp, Vittlar, and Maria"(72).Grassunfurls more than 50 years of German history, stretching from 1899-1954, to reveal Ordinary people's willing embrace of the Nazi regime, the suffering it ultimately causes them, which was preceded bytheir obliviousness to the suffering it inflicted on others, and their refusal after 1945 to address the enormity of what had happened and their own role in it.WhileGrass was hardly the first German writer to take on the subject of Hitler's Germany and to depict everyday life awayfrom the front line of battle, what the exiled writers (Mann, Doblin, Seghers, Arnold Zweig), all of whom had reached creative Maturity before 1933, could never do adequately was to render day-to-day life under the Nazis, for the simple reason that theyhad had no direct experience of it. The great Post-war literary accounts of the period, which mark in many ways the pinnacles of creative achievement in the postwar German novel, had not been written in 1959: Jurek Becker's *Jakob the Liar* (1969); Uwe Johnson's *Anniversaries. From the Life of Gesine Cresspahl*(1970-83); Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance*(1975-81); or Christa Wolf's *Patterns of Childhood* (1976) all appeared over the 25 years which followed. Of thegreat names in German post- war writing, only Heinrich Boll had produced work worthy of his subsequent reputation. As he published *Billiards at Half Past Nine* and Johnson *Speculations about Jakob* in the same year as *The Tin Drum*, 1959 was called the *annus mirabilis* of renascent German writing. The Post-war German writers mainly concentrated on Jewish Holocaust neglecting other aspects of the war, as Dagmar Barnouw observed in the book '*The Modern German Novel*' 'Public

remembrance of Jewish victimisation has been remarkably static and exclusive in German post-war culture, despite the fact that the lives of millions of non-Jews were prematurely ended or painfully disrupted and changed by the experience of a total war that they had feared above all else. If recalled, their memories, too, would make present normality seem strange. (170). But Grass is succeeded in writing about all aspects in war. When compared to other Post-war influential writers like Heinrich Boll and Siegfried Lenz, Grass stands as best one because he spoke about suffering of Poles, and Jewish Holocaust, Dwarfs and Homo-sexual, and women's problems and about people who were used as slave labours from Germany occupied places.

*Tin Drum* encompasses the period from, 1899 to 1953, a period that is dominated by Nazism, Thus the book one consisting period between (1899-38), deals with the time before advent of Fascism, which on account of Danzig's status of free city did not hold full sway, until the first major orchestrated eruption, violence against Jews during holocaust. Book two (1939-45) covers the second world war and demise of Fascism, and book three depicts the post Fascist era, and the post War West Germany, and Federal Republic (1945-1954).

'Granted:I am an inmate of a mental hospital. (TD,1).

The very first line of line of the novel *Tin Drum*, everyone's mind will be blocked even as Soren Frank states in *Migration and literature* 'With the first sentence –Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital ...my block was gone (38). Readers were thrown into a kind of confusion how can we believe in this narration. But the reason for his hospitalisation was revealed in the last chapters of the novel that he was wrongly convicted of a murder and presumably insane so he was sent to mental hospital instead of prison. The cumulative guilt of the nightmare years of German history is refracted and rearranged most overtly in Oskar's grotesquely distorted narrative of his own personal guilt. For Oskar, it emerges by the end of the novel, has in fact been committed to his mental hospital as criminally insane, convicted of the murder of a young woman he had also previously attempted to rape. But her death is by no means the first death in which Oskar, by his own account, is involved. Indeed Oskar achieves the unique distinction of being no less than a triple parricide, for he claims at various points to be responsible for the death of all 'three' of his parents. In the end, The Tin Drum, he urging its readers throughout to acknowledge in spite of themselves the total unreliability of its narrator, implicitly invites them to confront the question of how reliable any narrative, whether ostensibly fictional or ostensibly historical, can ever be. The readiness with which Oskar admits to or even eagerly claims guilt for events which are clearly not his personal responsibility very overtly implies the possible existence of other events for which certain readers in the Germany of 1959 were perhaps equally unwilling to accept responsibility. It is Gunter Grass changed the mind-set of people about hiding their past. He made them to repent for the past and made the Germans to correct their behaviour by correcting their past and the crime they have done in the name of Nationalism. Gunter was succeeded in making the Germans to repent for their past, and he was considered as 'conscience keeper of the German nation' as stated by Stuart Taberner in the book *The Cambridge Companion to Gunter Grass* 'In the United Kingdom and the United States, an older generation of critics tends to be broadly sympathetic towards Grass's campaigning for greater democracy and greater enlightenment in relation to Germany's Nazi-past admiring his role as 'conscience of the nation' and perhaps envious of the prominence that writer-intellectuals can achieve in Germany.(7). *Tin Drum*, the novel is talking about German past, we have more destruction than creation there are only three births in the novel, as of Agnes the mother of Oskar, the protagonist and Oskar and little Kurt son of Alfred and Maria. But there are almost twenty three deaths in the novel directly addressing about the destruction that has taken place during war times. This is a symbolic expression of destruction than creation in Germany by writer Grass through his novel *Tin Drum*. Gunter Grass succeeded in making the German society confront to their past. The injury that was caused the growth in Oskar Matzerath's body at the end of second book of the novel is compared to growth of Germany after destructive war, and the final conclusion that death and growth is inevitable, you and me all of us will die someday, but the only answer to death is laugh let's not weep. The destruction that happened during war is also a nightmare but correcting the mistakes that happened in the past, is only way to forward. The former president Richard Von Weizsacker in his speech said "All of us (Germans) whether guilty or not,

whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by the past and liable for it. The young and old generations must and can help each other to understand, why it is vital to keep alive the memories. It is not a case of coming to terms with the past. This is not possible it cannot be subsequently modified or undone. However anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity of their past, is prone to new risks of infection".(4). Grass succeeded in making the Germans to confront with their past even in 1960's itself. The chapter titled "The Onion Cellar" is the best example of this where he make the Germans to remember their past, without going far from it, or hiding their past. Because as mentioned above "one who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* is a post-war sensation in German literature by its concept of past, and moving them to present by correcting their mistakes and the novel can be regarded as the conscience of German Nation.

**References**

- Bartram, Graham *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern German novel*, Cambridge university press, New York, 2004.
- Grass, Gunter *The Tin Drum*, Vintage Classics, Great Britain, 2009.
- Frank,Soren *Migration and literature: Gunter Grass, MilanKundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad*. Palgrave McMillan, US, 2008.
- Taberner, Stuart *The Cambridge Companion to Gunter Grass*,CUP, UK, 2009.
- Nagarkar, Kiran *Germany's conscience keeper*, August 30, 2015.
-