

MORALITY AS A WEAPON OF RESISTANCE IN THE WORKS OF HERTA MÜLLER

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Abstract: This paper examines Herta Müller's novel *The Hunger Angel*, focusing specifically on the aspect of morality in the novel as a means of resistance against totalitarianism. Both Herta Müller's life and literary work constitute a history of resistance—a story of how one can transform personal, subjective experiences into the biography of an entire country. The central themes of her novels include authority and power, censorship and subjugation, emigration, and the search for national identity. To protect oneself from the destructive impact of totalitarianism, the writer considers adherence to universal moral principles to be one of the most important tools of resistance. In an era that overturned conventional understandings of law and justice, and at a time when neither human nor divine law seemed to function, the preservation of fundamental human and moral values remained the only path to salvation. Herta Müller's novels are particularly relevant to Georgia as part of the post-Soviet space. The issues depicted in her works are also deeply significant for Georgian society. The Soviet experience and the collective, intergenerational traumas it produced still require extensive study and reflection. For this reason, Müller's portrayal of Romanian totalitarianism, resistance, and the collapse of moral frameworks under oppressive regimes reflects the broader experience of the former Soviet world, and especially that of Georgia, where manifestations of totalitarianism and political repression were, in many cases, particularly severe.

Keywords: Herta Müller, totalitarianism, morality, repression, deportation.

Introduction. Herta Müller is a Romanian-born German-language writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2009. The central theme of Müller's works is the manifestation of totalitarianism in Romania during different historical periods, ranging from Soviet influence to the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Both Herta Müller's life and literary work constitute a history of resistance—a story of how personal, subjective experiences can be transformed into the biography of an entire nation. The main themes of her novels include authority and power, censorship and submission, emigration, and the search for national identity. Born in Nițchidorf, the writer grew up in a Romanian environment, yet she was a descendant of the German Swabian community that had settled there. From birth, her national identity was divided: on the one hand, she was a child of Romania, while on the other, she belonged to German culture. Autobiographical episodes from the writer's childhood had a profound influence on her entire literary oeuvre, particularly on her novel *The Hunger Angel*. The novel's central theme is the life of Romanian deportees in the Soviet Gulag. In depicting this experience, Herta Müller reconstructed the fragmented recollections of her mother, who had been deported to a labor camp in Ukraine for four years.

In 2009, when awarding Herta Müller the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Nobel Committee described her as “one who, with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the lives of the dispossessed.” Indeed, the oppressed under authoritarian regimes and the anatomy of totalitarianism constitute the

central themes of Müller's work. Having lived under two tyrants—Ion Antonescu and Nicolae Ceaușescu—she was perhaps more intimately familiar with oppression and tyranny than with anything else.

Discussion. Herta Müller was born in 1953 in Banat, in the village of Nițchidorf, a small German-speaking settlement populated by German Swabians who had settled there following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1940, Romania aligned itself with the Nazi regime, and Antonescu pledged loyalty to Adolf Hitler. As a result, the majority of Romania's ethnic Germans entered military service for the Third Reich. Herta Müller's father was among them. In 1944, the Soviet Army invaded Romania and overthrew the Antonescu regime. On Stalin's orders, all ethnic Germans between the ages of seventeen and fifty-five were deported to Soviet labor camps. Among them was Müller's mother, who spent several years in the Novo-Horlivka labor camp in Ukraine.

In 1987, Herta Müller moved to the Federal Republic of Germany. She attempted to sever both her physical and imagined ties with her homeland, and for a short time she seemed to succeed. It appeared that everything should finally be well and that she could feel safe; however, this was not the case. "It is true that emigrants leave the dangerous side at an opportune moment and find a more or less acceptable country, but in a foreign land they remain in the wrong place, unable to decide to move elsewhere once again" (Müller, 2017, p.42). After the fall of Ceaușescu in 1989, the writer began to restore her emotional ties with her homeland and returned to Romania through her literary work. As noted by Tsagareli (2011), "Herta Müller also realizes that she will never be able to relinquish her homeland, because it constantly accompanies her, just as a native dialect accompanies a person."

"For the detailed and truthful depiction of totalitarianism," declared the Nobel Committee in 2009. Earlier that same year, Herta Müller's most significant novel, *The Hunger Angel*, had already been published—a work that secured her a place among the living classics of contemporary literature. Müller's characters belong to what may be called the "whisperers' generation." The term "whisperers" was coined by the historian Orlando Figes, author of *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. It refers to entire generations who internalized the fundamental rule of survival: speak in whispers, blend into the crowd, remain unnoticed, and live a parallel existence that spares you from reflecting on or analyzing your own actions. The subject of deportations and exile to the Gulag remained taboo in Romania, just as the country's alliance with the Third Reich was largely unspoken. Herta Müller, however, decided that the time had come to reflect on the past—not in whispers, but through a loud and uncompromising voice. She began collecting the stories of the inhabitants of Nițchidorf who had personally experienced the hardships of the labor camps. Among them was her own mother. *The Hunger Angel* is a combination of these stories.

The novel's protagonist is Leo Auberg, a homosexual poet who is deported to Novo-Horlivka because of his German ethnicity and sexual orientation. The novel is presented as his fictional narrative, with Leo himself serving as the narrator. Leo, however, has a real-life prototype: the beloved Romanian-German poet Oskar Pastior, who, like Leo, spent several years in a Soviet labor camp. For many years, Herta Müller and Oskar Pastior worked together on the book. Müller gave artistic form to her friend's documentary recollections. After Pastior's death, she completed the novel on her own, enriching his account with the stories of other real survivors of the camp.

Herta Müller's central concern in her work, alongside totalitarianism, is the sense of human morality—the anatomy of morality and its transformation in the course of political change. The question of how moral orientations disintegrate, how the universal moral instruments shaped by humanism and preserved over centuries gradually degrade, has always been a central theme of her novels. In her émigré prose, the theme of morality undergoes transformation and becomes closely connected to the preservation of national identity and the sense of belonging to one's homeland. The preservation of morality becomes an inseparable element

of the preservation of one's roots. It is precisely the awareness of, and adherence to, universal humanist moral principles that becomes the crutch for Leo Auberg in a completely degrading environment—an environment that relentlessly attempts to dehumanize the individual and uses two ruthless instruments for this purpose: constant hunger and the loss of the sense of shame. In this case, the totalitarian environment—the Soviet labor camp—dehumanizes people by exploiting their basic instincts. When you are hungry, you do not rebel for freedom; when you no longer feel shame, you no longer belong to humanity itself.

The regime's first attempt at dehumanization and the destruction of the moral compass begins already on the way to the camp: prisoners are forced to defecate in front of one another. After this, an irreversible process of degradation begins, from which it seems almost impossible to emerge as a human being again. A starving husband steals his wife's daily ration and condemns her to death; at the "court of bread," food thieves are mercilessly killed; human life becomes worth nothing. Causal relationships disappear, and in the labor camp only one principle of causality remains: one swing of a shovel equals one piece of bread.

What Leopold Auberg does in this immoral environment in search of moral anchors cannot be easily explained. His actions are best described by Viktor Frankl's words from *Yes to Life*: Frankl says that "man is the being who is able to turn life into meaning—not through survival, but through significance" (Frankl, 2023, p.31). Frankl, who spent four years in a Nazi concentration camp, understood better than anyone the life-saving power of assigning even the most primitive meanings to existence.

Leo Auberg does the same in Müller's novel—through the poeticization of objects, he assigns special meaning even to the most ordinary events. For example, he calls the acute onset of hunger "the appearance of the Angel of Hunger." "The Angel of Hunger" is also the title of the book in its English translation.

"Every person has to carry their own luggage; in the camp this luggage consists only of an empty stomach and memories" (Müller, 2019, p.96). In the camp, the past no longer has meaning; there is only the present day, which must be endured in order to survive—and one must remember that one swing of a shovel equals bread, bread equals survival, and survival equals escape.

The inhumanity and cruelty of the camp lie in the fact that no one manages to escape it; it turns into a burden for anyone who returns from it. Leo Auberg is even, in a sense, killed by nostalgia—he does not know which place is home: Nițchidorf or Novo-Horlivka. But what is it that has preserved the camp in Leo's memory as a kind of home and even awakened in him an unbearable sense of longing?

The answer lies precisely in Herta Müller's understanding of morality: in the midst of total immorality, even a shared piece of bread, helping someone comb their hair, or offering a hand when someone falls from a coal cart—these small humanistic acts acquire extraordinary significance in a dehumanized environment. And who knows, perhaps the preservation of humanity in absolute immorality is the highest manifestation of Christian morality.

"I believe that spiritual reality is the cornerstone of existence, and it is there that dignity and responsibility are born" (Frankl, 2023, p.15).

Conclusion. In conclusion, it can be said that, in order to protect oneself from the destructive influence of totalitarianism, the writer considers adherence to universal moral principles to be one of the key tools of resistance. In an era that turned the very understanding of law and justice upside down, and in a time when neither human nor divine law functions, the only remaining salvation lies in the preservation and maintenance of general human moral principles. Herta Müller is one of the most prominent and striking figures in contemporary literature, whose central themes remain as sharp and relevant as ever. Her novels are particularly significant for Georgia as part of the post-Soviet space. The issues addressed in Müller's works are also deeply painful for Georgian society—the Soviet experience and the collective, intergenerational traumas still require study and reflection. For this reason, Müller's depiction of Romanian totalitarianism and resistance reflects

the broader experience of the former Soviet world, especially Georgia, which in some cases was among the most severely affected by manifestations of totalitarianism and repression. Later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia, like Romania, also experienced extremely severe civil conflict.

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