

The Exploration of Identity and Belonging in Post-World War II German Literature

WANG Danruo

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The research paper explores belongingness and identity in post-WWII German literature through the lens of iconic scholars, including Wolf, Şenocak, and Grass. The three authors are central and prominent figures in building German literature in the aftermath of the war. National divisions in Germany, rebuilding destroyed communities, and guilt struggles marked this literature. German authors utilized literature during the war to question and comprehend fractures, structures, and the comprehensive identity of a nation with issues of guilt, war, splitting, differences, and divisions. By comprehensively linking Wolf and Grass' authorships to modern debates on multiculturalism and migration, we derive fundamental insights and ideas into their applicability to issues affecting our world today. Some of the contemporary issues are immigration, civil wars, and trauma affecting people. Authors like Grass had a significant role to play during post-WWII in Germany, like dealing with and handling migrant and refugee experiences, returning of soldiers, the Holocaust, and the hardships of life.

Keywords: belongingness, identity, German post-WWII literature

Historical Background

Germany was bankrupt and physically devastated after the Second World War (WWII). Many German citizens were forcefully countering their complicities, Holocaust fears and horrors, and Nazi war crimes during the expressive regimes (Ahonen, 2017). The Germans confronted these issues and challenges through passive compliance, active fighting, and participation. These went source as the country was split into two parts, West and East Germany. Every part of the country was under different leadership and political ideologies. The West was under capitalist democracy, while the East had socialist rule and regime.

The division between Western and Eastern parts of Germany brought extra issues of belongingness, identity fragmentations, and dislocations (Shapiro, 2024). During this war, writers were responsible for rebuilding their nation and self-sense. Such historical guilt, anxiety, and trauma seen during the post-war period form literature that integrates and incorporates fundamental themes of new identity discovery, alienation, and memory. After the war, people struggle to get a new sense of belongingness (Summers, 2018). Alienation from their land is common due to migrations and traveling to other areas. These issues were present in the past, during the war, and are still evident today. The split of Germany and migration brought themes of alienation and search for belongingness and identity among people.

The Exploration of Identity and Belonging in Post-World War II Literature

People cannot ignore the exploration of belongingness and identity in post-WW II German literature because it is a multifaceted, comprehensive, and fundamental theme through great authors like Christa Wolf, Zafer Şenocak, and Günter Grass. The three are central and iconic figures in building German literature in the war's aftermath. National divisions, rebuilding destroyed communities, and guilt struggles marked this period. It is a theme that reflects how people grapple and struggle with their past fragmented and divided country, Germany. People are linking this theme to discussions and issues regarding multiculturalism and national identity.

Literature Review

Günter Grass is an iconic and influential author during the "History's Weight" era. Gunter explores the complexities of German identity in 1959 through his book *The Tin Drum*. In this novel, Grass examines moral ambiguity, distress, and trauma found during the Nazi period and era (Варецька, 2022). He also explores the psychological and emotional scars of the ordinary German citizen's complicity. The Grass' work and writing question historical and memory's role and duty in shaping people's national and individual identity. In his book *The Tin Drum*, the main character, Matzerath, does not grow up to symbolically perceive rejection during the war of complicities of adulthood (Frank, 2015). Matzerath, in the novels, depicts a distorted perspective showing the struggles of German society in confronting the past (Kışmir, 2019). After the wars, it also tried to forge a better future for fragmented Germany.

Grass explores identity more through other workers, like *Crabwalk* in 2002 (Malchow, 2021). In "Crabwalk", Grass explains people's intergenerational transmission of memory, suffering, and guilt. The author revisits Wilhelm Gustloff's sinking occurring in WWII. He gives complex and comprehensive narratives regarding reconciliation, uniting, victimhood, suffering, and memory (Варецька, 2022). Grass wrote the novel after reorganization and reunification but is still struggling and grappling with the repercussions of Germany's national belongingness and identity. It shows the resonance of past trauma through different times and generations, shaping national identity over different eras.

Christa Wolf is another prominent and iconic writer of the post-war era in Germany. She offers complementary and critical perspectives and insights on identity. Wolf writes and authors his work from an East German perspective and context. The author questions the individual's role in larger and broader ideological backgrounds and frameworks (Summers, 2018). In Wolf's book *Divided Heaven*, she shows the political and personal life tensions of divided and fragmented Germany (1963). Wolf majors on the character's internal conflicts and differences as they navigate ideological and cultural commitments, love, and loyalty. In the novel's literature, the divided and separated self implies a greater societal and communal divide, coupling Wolf's characters' personal and individual struggles and depicting German identity's fragmentation during the Cold War era.

The other crucial contribution by Wolf regarding identity is evident in her book *Cassandra* of 1983 (Summers, 2018). In *Cassandra*, Wolf writes about past myths and misconceptions to present and reflect modern concerns regarding marginalized voices, power and authority, and oppression (Johnston, 2021). Wolf appropriately blends contemporary and historical themes to emphasize the intersection between political and societal forces and personal identity. Wolf's writing often emphasizes women's roles and responsibilities and how societal and historical pressures shape their identities. She offers a fundamental and appropriate feminist discourse and perspective on belongingness and identity.

Post-WWII Multiculturalism and German Identity

The post-war era in Germany reconciled with its past and dealt with critically evolving and contemporary concepts and approaches to belongingness and identity. After WWII, Germany became a diverse and multicultural community and society due to the emergency of guests and foreign workers between the 1960s and 1950s and immigration of the proceeding decades. Such shift and influx of guests into Germany added extra explorational layers of national belonging and identity. These workers and immigrants were from Greece, Turkey, France, and Italy, among other neighboring countries. Germany became a multicultural community from being homogenous. Such migration brought contemporary and modern literature exploring identity and belonging themes from the lens of immigrants.

Through this new context and perspective, scholars like Zafer Şenocak, Emine Özdamar, Grass, and Wolf offer fertile and conducive ground for exploring modern migration, immigrants, and multicultural issues. The work by these four writers on divided belongingness and identity through political ideologies and historical guilt is linkable to contemporary discussions and topics on how migration and cultural exchange shape national identity. The four authors' queries on individuals' roles in their societies and belonging resonate effectively with our current globalized and digitalized world. In such a world, the movement of cultures and diverse people challenges identity notions and perspectives individuals build.

The Link Between Identity and Memory

During post-WWII, memory's role in shaping and forming identity is another central theme regarding German literature today. Scholar and writers like Winfried G. Sebald examine the intersecting between trauma and our memory in identity formation (Ellison, 2022). Sebald's writings like *Austerlitz* show the relationship between historical, modern, and fictional reflection while meditating on the Holocaust's long-term effects to comprehend the past (2001). The main character in *Austerlitz* searches for his identity and discovers that he is a Jewish kid who came to Britain during warfare. Such an instance represents the search for identity in a foreign country (Ellison, 2022). The books present a haunting and fragmented memory and ability and challenges in the search for a sense of identity and belongingness after a tragic loss like a time of war.

Return's Literature

Multiple prisoners, militaria, and soldiers from the war came back to Germany, only to become displaced, contributing to the return's literature. Such works and writings explore the above-changing theme. It also looks at mental and emotional issues from it. Heinrich Böll is a prominent scholar exploring this theme, and his work examines ordinary and normal German people and tries to draw appropriate meaning from their stressful lives (Hermans, 2017). Böll explores the psychological and emotional scars families underwent during the Nazi regime. The author questions the role of collective duty, responsibility, and personal guilt. Böll's characters are always struggling and battling their identity and belongingness during the war while enduring to restructure their lives and fighting their memories.

Discussion

East Germany's Life and Status

East Germany's works and literature explore themes of belongingness and identity during the oppressive and exploitive regimes of the GDR, attributable to huge issues. During this period, identity is combined with

state power, control, and surveillance. A secret police service known as Stasi would infiltrate multiple aspects and areas of people's lives, creating fear and paranoia (Summers, 2018). Wolf is a renowned and iconic author of East German origin, exploring tension issues in her writing. This writer discusses divided belonging and identity in her 1963 work, *Divided Heaven*. Wolf explores German's identity between a woman living in the Eastern part of the counter and her man staying in the West and their love narrative. The book reflects an ideological, psychological, and emotional split through the lens of political division. Wolf also discusses the trauma and distress of staying under surveillance, showing how oppressive and careless states affect relationships, personal identity, harmony, and trust.

Connecting With the Past

The concept or strategy of establishing better terms with an individual's past was the main and fundamental theme during this period. Works that examine shame, fear, and guilt stemming from the Nazi era and Holocaust present this theme of connecting with one's past. Works such as Grass' writings are good examples as they question the potentiality of forgiveness and total redemption. Grass utilizes magical realism in *The Tin Drum* to determine the collapse and decline of the German community during the Nazi period. In the novel, the character Oskar Matzerath searches for concepts of personal responsibility, innocence, anxiety, and guilt after facing oppression and collective and aggregate crimes (Kışmir, 2019). Grass reflects the fear and tension evident between collective history and individual identity. These are some of the struggles stemming from post-WWII Germany.

The Modern or Contemporary Germany and Reunification

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, leading to Germany's reunification and the emergence of new literature. The writing and literature reflected the difficulties and hardships of bringing together and reconciling East and West German, two distinct identities. *After the Wall*, a 2004 book by Jana Hensel, is a fantastic work reflecting the challenges of reuniting West and East Germany. Alienation and identity crisis themes are common in Hensel's works. During the war crisis, many people migrated to other areas and hence faced alienation from their land, as seen in Germany during the post-war era.

Cultural Exchange and Immigration or Migration

Cultural exchange is a theme relevant today in our contemporary world. Identity, migration, and cultural exchanges are common themes of post-WWII in Germany and are appropriate and applicable today. There is fear and tension when preserving national belongingness and identity while embracing and cultivating multiculturalism (Arslan, 2016). These are issues that Wolf, Şenocak, and Grass' characters were struggling with during war and tension, reconciling their national and personal histories altogether.

An appropriate strategy to study Wolf's and other works will entail exploring the presentation of split belonging and identities in German literature during post-WWII, which would resonate effectively with our modern worldwide difficulties. For example, immigrants' and refugees' experiences depict themes such as belongingness search, displacement, lack of identity, and fragmentation (Johnston, 2021). These are some of the main themes seen in Wolf's and Şenocak's novels and other works. Debates revolving around cultural diversity, nationalist movements, social integration, political identity, and multiculturalism are lenses to explore contemporary parallels and themes.

Conclusion

During post-WWII German works of literature, authors were exploring themes of belonging and identity via the lens of political and ideological division, historical trauma, and moral responsibility's lens. It offers the aftermath of national and personal endeavors and struggles. German writers used literature during the war to question and understand fractures and the complex identity of a nation with issues of guilt, war, splitting, differences, and divisions. By appropriately linking Wolf and Grass' writings and works to modern debates on multiculturalism and migration, we may obtain crucial insights into their applicability to issues affecting us today. Some of the contemporary issues are immigration, civil wars, and trauma affecting people.

Authors like Grass had a great role to play during post-WWII in Germany, like dealing with and tackling migrant and refugee experiences, returning of soldiers, the Holocaust, and hardships of life. Grass explores identity and explains people's transmission of their memory, suffering, trauma, and guilt. The writer offers a complex, thorough, comprehensive narrative on reconciliation, unification, victimhood, oppression, oppression, and memory. Grass explores the reorganization of Germany. Grass shows how past trauma through different times and generations might shape their national identity. Alienation and identity themes are common. During the war crisis, thousands of people migrated from their residences to other locations, facing alienation. The above explorations and themes reflect universal struggles by Germans and their national belongingness and identity after the war of significant upheaval, trauma, distress, and losses.

References

- Ahonen, P. (2017). Germany and the aftermath of the Second World War. *The Journal of Modern History*, 89(2), 355-387.
- Arslan, G. (2016). Undivided waters: Spatial and translational paradoxes in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *The bridge of the golden horn*. In *The novel and Europe* (pp. 271-286). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ellison, I. (2022). Austerlitz by W. G. Sebald: A late fairy tale. In *Late Europeans and melancholy fiction at the turn of the millennium* (pp. 107-163). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Frank, S. (2015). The migrant vision in Günter Grass's *The tin drum*. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 42(2), 156-170.
- Hermans, C. (2017). Becoming Böll. In *Interbellum literature* (pp. 44-64). Leiden: Brill.
- Johnston, E. K. (2021). Two novels and two character studies: *Cassandra* by Christa Wolf and *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2021/106
- Kişmir, G. (2019). Reconstruction of the past in Günter Grass's *Crabwalk*. *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 59(1), 217-228.
- Malchow, T. B. (2021). *Günter grass and the genders of German memory: From the tin drum to peeling the onion* (Vol. 1). Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer.
- Shapiro, M. B. M. (2024). Holocaust memorialization: When the individual meets the political and becomes communal (Doctoral dissertation, Brandeis University, 2024).
- Summers, C. (2018). Hostage to feminism? The success of Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* in its 1984 English translation. *Gender and History*, 30(1), 226-239.
- Варецька, С. (2022). The phenomenon of guilt and redemption in the novel *Crabwalk* by Günther Grass. *Сіверянський літопис*, (2), 105-109.