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Generation Gap in the Plays of the First Post-war Years in West and East Germany

Anzhela Rafizovna Lisenko¹

Abstract

In this article the author deals with dramatic art of West and East Germany in the first post-war years and studies the issue of fathers and sons in works “*The Man Outside*” (“*Draußen vor der Tür*”) by W. Borchert (1947, West Germany) and “*Wie Tiere des Waldes*” by F. Wolf (1948, East Germany). The main topic of both plays is the war issue, the motive of guilt and responsibility growing into a generation gap. The representatives of the younger generation try to find out how their “fathers” could let fascism and war happen, why the “children” who had gone to war were forced to kill and to be killed. In the setting of the main conflict the one with authorities and God in both plays arises, there is an issue of depreciation of human life, a madness issue. As a result of comparison of plays the author comes to a conclusion that despite the common topic and the main conflict of plays the resolution becomes different. The play of East German F. Wolf has a more optimistic nature. The total hopelessness of a situation is observed in the work of Borchert. It is probably connected with the fact that optimism and belief in better future were important components of the socialist ideology and the principle of a socialist realism dominating in East Germany.

Keywords: German literature, Theatre, History, Generation gap, German drama, Wolfgang Borchert, Friedrich Wolf, War issue, Motive of guilt, Dramatic art, West Germany, East Germany, Post-war plays.

¹ Kazan Federal University, Institute of International Relations, History and Oriental Studies E-mail: anzhela.amirova@gmail.com

Introduction

During the first years after the end of World War II economic, political, moral and psychological chaos held sway in Germany. When soldiers were coming back home from the lost war in the spring of 1945, they saw ruins on the place of their houses, they couldn't find their families. The roads were crowded by refugees, released prisoners of concentration camps, orphans. People lived in a state of uncertainty, they didn't know what would happen to them tomorrow, what decision the government of the victorious states would make regarding them.

This period of the German history is called “Hour Zero”. The whole life, including the cultural scene, had to be built from scratch. Prominent German writers, that had been forced to emigrate during the Nazi regime, didn't hurry to return home. The authors who entered the literature at that time – W. Borchert, H. Böll, A. Andersch, etc. – were, as a rule, young writers who had gone to war being a pupil or a student, who hadn't seen anything in their lives except for the horrors of war. Therefore they were interested, first of all, in a war issue and an ordinary man at war. Literature of this period is called “rubble literature” (“Trümmerliteratur”). In a well-known essay “Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur”, H. Böll (1952) called for the simple and honest literature connected with the actual reality. It is no coincidence that a question of individual and collective guilt in tragic events of World War II and Holocaust played center stage at this time.

The “Hour Zero” concept belongs, first of all, to the literature of West Germany. Literary life in the occupational zone of the USSR developed a little differently. The government of the country considering the destruction of fascism and its ideology to be the main task of art had a great influence on literature. Moreover, many communist writers (B. Brecht, A. Seghers, F. Wolf, etc.) returned to East Germany from emigration. They had already gained world recognition, basing on pre-war humanistic tradition and its anti-fascist activities during emigration. Nevertheless, the war issue, the motive of guilt and responsibility took an important place in the east as well.

The question of responsibility grows into a generation gap during this period. “Sons” ask their “fathers” how they could have let fascism happen, how they could have stood aside or become a direct participant, what extent “sons” who had gone to war and been forced to kill and to be killed were guilty. Generation gap shows itself especially obvious in literature of West Germany in works of H. Böll, W. Borchert, S. Lenz, etc.

Generation gap appears not only in literary works, but also in a near literature life. The young writers who had come back from war opposed themselves to the preceding literature (e.g., see Wiechert, 1945; Barner, 2006).

Methods

The German plays of the first post-war years was studied by literary researches such I.M. Fradkin (1958, 1961, 1977), H. Geiger (1973), H. Müller-Waldeck (1984), G. Burgess (2003, 2010), H. Hahn (2014) and others. Their works are devoted to the study of lifetime and works of the writer. In this article we will consider the revealing of the subject of guilt and responsibility of generations in drama works of the first post-war years of authors-representatives of West and East Germany. Such plays as “The Man Outside” (“Draußen vor der Tür”) by W. Borchert (1947, West Germany) and “Wie Tiere des Waldes” by F. Wolf (1948, East Germany) served as an object of the research. The complex descriptive analysis of the text acts as a main method of the research. The author's point of view reveals itself during the analysis of the problem and thematic, plot and composite level of plays and the means of art imaging. Also a cross-disciplinary approach is represented to be productive.

Discussion

Wolfgang Borchert (1921-1947) became one of the first authors who had brought up a subject of fault and responsibility of generations in his works. Borchert's drama “The Man Outside” (Borchert, 2001) was created right after the end of World War II as a reaction to it, now it is a sign work of post-war German literature. The main problem of guilt of the Germans in the tragic events of the XX century and their responsibility which is brought up by the author in his play isn't outspent eventually. Two line items reflected in the play remain urgent for today's Germany as well. First, it is searching for people who are guilty of the disaster; secondly it is a line item of the keeping away position and oblivion.

“The Man Outside” play tells us about the German soldier who came back from war. The non-commissioned officer Beckmann returns to Hamburg, but doesn't find his house and family. His parents have died, strange people live in his house, his wife has forgotten him and lives with another person, and his child is buried under ruins. Beckman freezes and starves. He tries to understand who is guilty of thousands of deaths. He wants to relieve himself of the responsibility for these deaths, “returning” it to those who had launched this war.

In search of guilty people Beckman goes to his former colonel, then to the cabaret director. But they don't share his guilt. The ridiculous soldier in respirator glasses telling them about responsibility seems a madman; his accusations seem silly and unreasonable.

Beckman looks for the last refuge in the house of the parents. But, having come to the house, he finds out that there is no plate with their name on the door, which means a final loss of himself. It turns out that Beckman is not a person in the house of his own parents any more.

Beckman's parents died of the denazification process. Frau Kramer living in their house now told Beckman that his father had continued "to curse Jews" even after the war, therefore he was deprived of his pension and the house and the old people had been forced to commit a suicide. Thus Borchert emphasizes that all everyone is guilty, even the ailing old man who wasn't involved in the war. However the standpoint of the old man was also common to many other ordinary citizens.

The motive of guilt is connected with a generation gap in Borchert's works. The character of the Borchert's play is a representative of the younger generation who has come back to the destroyed country, a person without past as everything that he had happened to see and experience in his life was his childhood in Hitlerite Germany, which didn't exist any longer, and a terrible war where he had to kill innocent people.

The guilt of the senior generation represented in the play by Beckman's anti-semitic father, his teachers, the military administration, philistines grows into accusation of God. In the last scene Beckman talks to God, trying to shift the responsibility onto him, but even God isn't ready to take the blame. He is only an old infirm man, the representative of the generation of fathers, the main father. But as well as other fathers, he allowed death of millions to happen, and now, as well as other fathers, steps aside.

The final monologue that was written in an expressionistic spirit sums up the result of the play and Beckman's searching for guilty people. Everyone is guilty, but nobody is ready to admit it.

Due to political features the issue of guilt and responsibility in East Germany is solved a little differently. The topic of fathers and sons is treated in a "lighter" key compared to the representatives of "rubble literature" by the East German writer Friedrich Wolf (1888-1953) in the play "Wie Tiere des Waldes", 1947.

As well as Borchert, Wolf is writing his play in the first post-war years and devotes it to the generation which has grown up during war and experienced all its burdens. The characters of the play are young people, who are in love but unhappy. The action of the play takes place in April, 1945 when everyone understands that the end of war is close, but when one of its most

terrible periods began young people, still boys, were taken to war and deserters were strictly pursued and punished through hanging. Kurt Timme appears to be such a 19-year-old deserter. Hanne, who is the daughter of the fanatical Nazi helping to look for deserters, is in love with Kurt. They run into the wood together like animals, but they can't hide there. Bullied by her father, understanding intolerableness of existence in the world where people are forced to kill each other, where people are worse than animals, and understanding that they can't escape, Hanne decides to commit a suicide and forces Kurt to shoot her. The young man is accused not only of desertion but of murder of the girl as well. He manages to break jail; Hanne's grandmother and mother are hiding him giving him hope for a new life. According to H. Müller-Waldeck, this ending sounds deeply symbolically, indicating the way opened in front of the German youth (1984: 92).

The playwright raises a question of the actual murderer of Hanne. Who is guilty of her death: her father, whose cruelty regarding her and her mother is close to sadism, or the world where she lives – cruel and unfair, who is guilty of the tragedy of the whole generation.

The name of the play has a subtitle “The play about bullying, love and death of one generation of youth” (*Ein Schauspiel von Hetzjagd, Liebe und Tod einer Jugend*) which emphasizes that animals in the play are not a cruel generation of fathers, but the younger generation bullied by adults as wild animals by hunters. The epigraph by T. Fontane not only indicates the main conflict of the play – the generation gap, but also answers a question, passing through the whole play whether children can be the judges of the parents. It is the same question which Borchert's, Böll's and Lenz's, later – Hochhuth's and Walser's characters have: who is guilty and who has the right to judge. Both these concepts – guilt (“Schuld”) and the right (“Recht”) are a keynote through the whole play.

The character of the play by F. Wolf Kurt suffers like Beckman of W. Borchert. He was forced to execute five soldiers at war; one of them was a fifteen-year-old boy. Here is a parallel with the situation of Beckman, who was guilty of death of eleven people, and who wants to share the responsibility for these deaths with other guilty people. But the senior generation meets Kurt's ambivalence with bullying.

In her farewell letter Hanne appeals to her parents, she asks them questions which torment her most: “Is war really more important than our life? What were we born for if, having hardly seen life, we were sent to death?” (“Ist denn der Krieg wichtiger als unser Leben? Wozu hat man uns geboren, wenn man uns, kaum im Leben, ins Sterben schickt?”) (Wolf, 1952: 247). And in conclusion of the letter she apologizes to God: “Let God forgive all of us” (“Gott verzeih uns allen!”). This is the only mention of God in the play. Unlike Beckman who abjures God Hanne asks Him to forgive all human sins.

The other kind of generation gap in the play is the conflict with the authorities. On Kurt's interrogations we see an image of the representative of the state machinery, ruthless and cruel. Here is a hint on the subsequent trial of fascists. The major expresses his hope to avoid punishment, to dissolve his individual guilt in collective one. That is one more parallel with Borchert's characters that hoped to avoid punishment for their crimes.

At the end of the play Kurt shares his personal guilt with the generation of fathers. Female characters come over to the side of sons. In the last scenes the status of personal guilt of each representative of the senior generation is transferred to the status of collective guilt, and, first of all, it is guilt towards sons.

In the last scene the motive of fault joins the motive of forgiveness. The last scene is full of syntactic, lexical and stylistic repetitions as if symbolizing the frequency of everything in the world. The task of a senior generation, according to the author of the play, is not to interfere with young people, but, on the contrary, to contribute to their development, to bring them up and support them. The younger generation has to be wiser and to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Wolf distinguishes between fathers and mothers in the senior generation. Female images, the representatives of the senior and younger generation are the idea of good. The generation gap is resolved peacefully regarding mothers. Fathers remain irreconcilable proponents of fascism. As J. Schröder notes, "there is a union of a mother and a grandmother with a son against fascist fathers who can't be changed for a new life" (2006: 151). In comparison with a feeling of tragic hopelessness in Borchert's play, the drop-scene of the Wolf's drama seems unreasonably optimistic.

Conclusion

Thus, F. Wolf's play is a peculiar "East German" version of "rubble literature". Despite all the difference of life situations, political and literary views of the authors, there is a lot of similar to W. Borchert's play things. It is generation gap actually, and the motive of guilt and responsibility. The conflict with the authorities is important in both plays: The colonel of Borchert and the major of Wolf as Nazi ideologists have no sense of guilt and hope to avoid punishment in deeds, having dissolved in the mass of other guilty people. The plays show the depreciation of human life: in Borchert's drama a person is only "a bunch of lime", people of Wolf become worse than animals. Functions of a dream and images, a madness issue should also be mentioned.

However the conflict in plays is resolved differently. We observe total hopelessness of a situation in the works of Borchert. There is final distraction of human relationships, Beckman remains alone with his guilt, assisting offenders stand aside, all doors are closed in front of him. With all tragic elements the situation isn't so gloomy in Wolf's works. Kurt isn't lonely as, being "betrayed" by fathers, he remains with his mother and grandmother. He manages to share his guilt, to relieve the part of responsibility. More positive solution to this issue in Wolf's works may be connected with the fact that optimism and belief in better future were important components of the socialist ideology and the principle of a socialist realism dominating in East Germany.

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