

**The Potentate Hunger and the Camouflaged Angel in  
Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel*  
Dr. S. Punitha**

=====  
The fundamental human activity, eating, is very essential both for the survival and social functioning. The fundamental qualities to endorse the understanding of human society overviews the eating habits, rituals, the choice of dining companions and the reasons behind these purposes. Food is not only meant for the survival purpose but also to delight the individual. Themes related to food are quite common among all types of writing, and they are often used as a literary device in promoting both verbal and visual impact. For example, the attractive display of the menu card leaves the best impression on a foodie.

Food is also a noteworthy theme in literature by and about each region, religion, class, and culture. They play a vital role in determining the identity of any individual by bringing out the emotions through the likeness or hatred, starving or hunger, anger or happiness. When food provides the path, it is the literature that acts as the truck in delivering the message to the readers.

In addition to reflecting social order and civilization, food is often the representative of the limitations imposed upon an individual, bleeding well with the idea of excess as a key element of the author's imagination. It offers a means for powerful imagery in adult literature as well. The aim of this paper is to try to portray how food as a means of communication picturizes the pains, the sufferings, anguish and fear under an undesirable situation.

Herta Müller, a 2009 Nobel Laureate, reminiscent the Romanian-born German writer, Oskar Pastior's irreparable past through the protagonist Leo Auberg in her novel *The Hunger Angel*. It clothes the historical event of the deportation of the Germans in Romania to the gulags of Russia in 1945 with flesh and blood and gives an emotional dimension to it. The novel depicts the trauma of hunger faced by the people in the deportation camps through the character of Leo Auberg, a seventeen-year old deportee.

Hunger, personified as an Angel, strikes each and every individual to transform them to be more and more selfish. The internees in the camp are given very little to eat and are made to sweat away their blood. The insatiable Hunger gets a full energetic life during the sleep after a

day's hard work. The craving for food makes them partly lunatic in their behavior. The hunger angel invariably approaches all the people in the camp:

Uploading was always a job for two or three people. Not counting the hunger angel, because we weren't sure whether there was one hunger angle for all of us or if each of us had his own. The hunger angel approached everyone, without restraint. He knew that where things can be loaded, other things can be loaded. In terms of mathematics, the results could be horrifying: if each person has his own hunger angel, then every time someone dies, a hunger angel is released. (The Hunger Angel 74-5)

The hunger embracing all the people, marks a great impression that cannot be easily erased: "The hunger angel looks for traces that can't be erased and erases traces that can't be saved." (78)

The narrator elaborates on how in the camp they tried to alleviate their hunger by eating orach, the mountain spinach and dill, a kind of grass. They also "stole before, during and after work" (16), begged and combed the rumble heaps. He describes the chronic hunger inflicted on them by "the hunger angel" (18). Leo reveals the never-ending hunger of the internees by his repetitive talk about 'the hunger', 'the chronic hunger', 'hunger . . . always new', 'the hunger echo', 'the hunger angels, 'starvation', pictures their hunger "which is always greater than [they] are" (17). He says that no words are adequate for the suffering caused by hunger" (18) and for 60 years, ever since he came back from the camp, he has been eating against starvation.

The text narrates about the eternal omnipresence of the omnivorous hunger in the internees, throughout their camp days. They had to shovel for their bread and "1 shovel load = 1 gram bread." (76) Leo says that shoveling was hard and it demanded total involvement. His wandering mind sapped his strength at times and sent him into a delirium in which he started fantasizing about food. This shows how the potentate hunger transforms a man into a scavenging animal. Further it suggests the fact that hard work and hunger eroded the mental ability of workers, resulting in deaths by accidents.

The death and the panic of the narrator is an instance of the panic of the people in the camp. Hunger strikes each and every individual to transform them to be more and more selfish. The craving for food makes them partly lunatic in their behavior as Leo points out:

With open hunger the angel leads me to the garbage pile behind the mess hall. . . Hunger is my direction, assuming it isn't his. The angel lets me pass. He isn't turning shy; he just doesn't want to be seen with me. . . . My craving is raw, my hands are wild. They are definitely my hands: the angel does not touch garbage. I shove the potato peelings into my mouth and close both eyes, that way I can taste them better, the frozen peels are sweet and glassy. (78)

Leo recalls a sleepless night, due to hunger and the torturing lice. Whatever Leo finds to pacify his hunger, he tries his hands at all of them. He consumes the grass, flowers and even frozen ice to quieten the hunger angel, which is his constant and noisy companion. The internees found an outlet for their compulsion to eat, in their dreams; but it was a torment too, as they had to wake up to the miserable reality. The golden rule among the internees in the camp was not to talk about the immeasurable hunger, when they were hungry.

Even though people lead a life of utter desperation, their urge to pacify the ravenous hunger stays higher with them. Leo's "skin-and-bones time" indicates the hard times in the camp during which they go on searching for any edible item. The section "The case of the stolen bread", describes Fenya, who doled out a ration of bread for all in the camp. Leo says: "She was the bread, the mistress from whose hands we ate, like dogs, day after day" (97). She was agonizingly disciplined and immaculately ugly, was the mistress of the bread and an accomplice of the hunger angel.

The deadly combination of insufficient supply of food and extraction of utmost labor from the people in the camp became a routine. The ration supply of food for one day will not be sufficient for the internees as this supply differs from people to people in the same camp according to their state of work. Fenya knew exactly who should get how much ration. Leo belonged to the 800gm. group – the normal ration. 600gm. was for light work inside the camp and 1000gm./1kg. was the exceptional ration for the heaviest labour. The bread was very heavy and a single slice as thick as the length of one's thumb weighed 800gms.

Leo's first decision of the day was not to eat his entire portion at breakfast with his cabbage soup and keep aside a bit for the evening. There was no meal at midday, as they were at work. Leo recalls what happened on a day when one of the internees, Karli Halmen, had the day off. He stole the other internee Albert Gion's saved bread. On finding this out, Albert punched him on the mouth, dragged him to the water bucket and choked him. The others in the barrack joined him in pissing him on his face. Once the business with the bread was over, everyone acted the same as always. The bread is the true cause of their fight and their hunger.

Further, the author describes how the internees took various measures to assuage the gutbiting hunger – by discussing the different recipes of various dishes, and about the reminiscences of their childhood days in their home town, when their hunger was at its peak. Leo, the narrator says: "Everyone gets caught in the bread trap" (110) – the trap of being steadfast at breakfast, the trap of swapping bread at supper and the trap of the saved bread under the pillow at night. Everyone felt cheated, after the swapping of bread. Utterly alone inside the pack, each person tried to make his soup go further. By doing so, they want to feel the presence of the camouflaged hunger angel in them.

Hunger isolates the people and brings out the worst in them. Leo says that before someone died of hunger, a 'white hare' appeared on his face and the bread from such a person is called "cheek-bread" (111). No one was allowed to take Kati Sentry's cheek bread. Once the

accordion player Konrad Fonn swapped bread with Kati. She gave him her bread but handed her a rectangular piece of wood. When she bit into it, he laughed at her. Karli intervened and got back her bread. Everyone stood up for her and she proved to be their conscience. Leo says that they had learned in the camp to clear away the dead without shuddering. Their clothes were taken off before they turned stiff, as they were needed to prevent those who were alive from freezing to death and their saved bread was eaten.

Leo speaks about the omnipresence of the hunger in the camp and describes the haunting hunger to be a palpable object. He personifies hunger as a man and a deceiver. Once when Leo went to the market, he found a 10 ruble note on the ground and purchased food items for all the 10 rubles and ate them greedily. When he was nearing the camp, he felt sick and threw up everything he had gorged; he cried even as he threw up, feeling bad about wasting all the expensive food. He entered the camp with an empty pillowcase, empty stomach and a bitter emptiness inside him.

The struggle for bread continues till the end of camp life. The exchange of bread prolongs:

In the evening, over cabbage soup, bread gets swapped, because your own bread always appears smaller than the other person's. And this holds true for everyone. Before the swap you feel light-headed, right after the swap you feel doubt. After swapping, the bread I traded seems bigger in the other person's hand than it did in mine. And the bread I got in return has shrunk . . . I better swap again. (110)

The exchange of bread in the camp takes place until the hunger catches the reader and intensifies the search for it in their own self. The author throughout the novel portrayed the various faces of the disguised hunger attacking the insane people at various angles. Even though these people lead a life of utter desperation, their urge to pacify the ravenous and the potentate hunger stays higher with them even after so many years of their freedom.

---

#### Work Cited

Boehm, Philip, translator. *The Hunger Angel*. By Herta Müller, Metropolitan Books, 2012.

#### Works Consulted

Applebaum, A. *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps*. Penguin, 2004.

Haines, B. editor. *Herta Müller*. University of Wales Press, 1998.

---. "‘Lebenwirim Detail’: Herta Müller’s Micro-Politics of Resistance." *Herta Müller*, edited by B. Haines, University of Wales Press, 1998.

[amp.dw.com/en/herta-müller](http://amp.dw.com/en/herta-müller)

---

Dr. S. Punitha, Assistant Professor of English

PG & Research Department of English, Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Thindal,

Erode – 638012 [punithasundaram1@gmail.com](mailto:punithasundaram1@gmail.com)

---

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

Editors: Dr. V. Sangeetha, Dr. B. J. Geetha, Dr. K. Sindhu, Dr. S. Boopathi and Ms. S. Sneha Sri

*Food in Literature: Papers Presented in National Seminar on Food in Literature, 2019*

Dr. S. Punitha

*The Potentate Hunger and the Camouflaged Angel in Herta Müller’s The Hunger Angel* 30