

The Dual Aspect of "Hunger" and the Roots of Alienation: A Thematic Analysis of Herta Müller's "Atemschaukel"

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Abstract

This article examines Herta Müller's novel *Atemschaukel*, focusing on its central theme of "hunger." First, it analyzes the two forms of hunger depicted in the novel: physiological hunger due to extreme food shortages and psychological hunger resulting from fear, oppression, and disciplinary violence. The paper then examines the dual symbolic meaning of the central motif of the "angel of hunger": it embodies both a demon that torments the flesh and an eternal shadow that devastates the soul and reveals the alienation of humanity. In order to trace the structural origins of hunger, this essay introduces Karl Marx's theory of alienated labor. Using four dimensions—the product of labor, the labor process, the essential nature of human beings, and interpersonal relationships—it systematically demonstrates how concentration camps transformed individuals into tools of labor through an extreme system of oppression. This process not only led to physical hunger, but also reproduced the accompanying mental emptiness and interpersonal alienation. Ultimately, this essay aims to show that the narrative of hunger in *Atemschaukel* goes beyond a mere condemnation of historical suffering and instead represents a profound philosophical examination of power, humanity, and existence.

Keywords

Hunger, Angel of Hunger, Alienation

1. Introduction

1.1 Summary of the Novel "Atemschaukel"

Leopold Auberg, the 17-year-old protagonist of Romanian-German descent, is sent to a concentration camp in Ukraine at the end of World War II, like all other Germans, to help rebuild the Soviet country. In the camps, people not only had to endure the cold and daily drudgery, but also fight against the violence of power. The "angel of hunger" was a constant presence. Hunger was always at the center of the literary work. This "hunger" is not only physical hunger, but also mental torment. The "angel of hunger" surrounds Leopold for many years after his return home.

Atemschaukel is not only set in a historical period of change and upheaval, but Herta Müller also depicts a hierarchical and oppressive social structure. People must obey orders and are severely punished if they do not comply. Herta Müller closely links hunger with this power and creates a feeling of breathlessness. This reveals a multitude of emotions such as helplessness, longing, indifference, and passion. Through Leopold's eyes, the author observes and documents the living conditions of those who are marginalized and deprived of their basic human rights. The themes of justice, compassion, and redemption are raised.

1.2 State of Research

The examination of the theme of hunger in *Atemschaukel* began with Zhang Guangyang's master's thesis, "A Study of the Problem of Hunger in Herta Müller's Novel *Atemschaukel*," which was completed in 2014. The thesis explored how physical and psychological hunger arise in the novel and how they relate to each other, what effects hunger has on "human beings," and how hunger and power relate to each other. In examining hunger, it becomes clear that "food," the most basic human need, is often not satisfied due to the mechanisms of power, and that humans are always bound by the structure of their bodies and minds. According to Zhang Guangyang, there are two research papers that deal with the topic of hunger: Li Jinning's "Study on the Hunger Narrative of *Atemschaukel*" and Wang Juntao's "An Analysis of the Spiritual Theme of the 'Hunger Angel' in Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel*". The former takes the relevant theories of narratology as a starting point for analyzing the narrative art of *Atemschaukel* and interprets the work from three aspects from the perspective of the hunger narrative. The latter analyzes "Hungerengel" from different perspectives in order to understand the spiritual theme and the central idea that the author wants to express.

2. The Theme of Hunger in the Novel *Atemschaukel*

The word "hunger" appears several times in Herta Müller's novel *Atemschaukel*. Hunger seems to permeate the novel from beginning to end. Constant hunger manifests itself in the form of "hunger angels" that surround Leopold not only in the camps, but also years later. The novel consists of 64 chapters, each with its own title and, at first glance,

seemingly unrelated to the others. Even if some of the chapters were removed, this would not affect the integrity of the work, so that it could be read without hindrance. This is because there is no direct logical connection between the events, such as from "Coal Schnapps" to "Zeppelin" to "The Phantom Pains of the Cuckoo Clock" and so on. At first glance, the novel seems confusing. However, upon closer analysis of the content, one finds an invisible thread that connects the novel: hunger. According to American behavioral and nutritional scientist Alexander W. Logue, there are two types of hunger: physiological and psychological. Physiological hunger arises mainly from a lack of food, which is perceived and reflected by the body's peripheral and central mechanisms[1]. In contrast, psychological hunger is mainly caused by cognitive factors, learning to eat, gluttony, or craving food[2].

2.1 Physiological Hunger

The important functional unit responsible for regulating hunger is a system consisting of the brain and the entire digestive system. This system is called the "brain-gut axis" [3]. The brain receives hormonal, neural, and metabolic information about the body's energy status and responds to this information with adaptive changes in energy expenditure. The systems responsible for signaling hunger and satiety are divided into two main mechanisms: the peripheral and central mechanisms[3]. Peripheral signaling is a perceptual signal that involves other parts of human physiology in addition to the central nervous system. Peripheral mechanisms include stomach contractions, sensory processes in the filled stomach and mouth area, thermoregulation, energy consumption, and the influence of other peripheral factors.

The story begins with the "starvation" and "chronic hunger disease" of the people arriving at the camps. What can be said about chronic hunger? Can we say that there is a hunger that makes you sick with hunger? That adds to the hunger you already have? The ever-new hunger that grows insatiably and jumps into the eternally old, laboriously tamed hunger[4]. Hunger is not only a constant companion of the workers in the camps, but a new hunger is constantly joining it. At this point, the "hunger angels" appear, and every person has their own hunger angel. The hunger angels are everywhere, they follow us everywhere.

One example is the chapter "10 Rubles." Here, "I" find ten rubles at the market. "My throat was throbbing, I was bathed in cold sweat, and I bought two cups of red raspberry water for 2 rubles and drank them in one gulp. Then I bought two corn cakes with sugar beet porridge, and I also ate the horseradish leaves, which were bitter but certainly as healthy for the stomach as medicine. Then I bought four Russian pancakes filled with cheese. Two for the pillow, two I ate. After that, I drank a pot of thick sour milk. I bought two more pieces of sunflower cake and ate both of them. Then I saw the one-legged boy again and drank another cup of red raspberry water[4]. Since "I" was hungry, "I" was very nervous about the ten rubles because I was afraid that someone would find out, so I quickly bought a lot of food with it. The human brain receives hunger signals, which trigger a feeling of hunger in the body and indicate that the body needs more energy. Chronic food shortages and the resulting long-term malnutrition have caused serious physical damage to the population.

2.2 Psychological Hunger

Recent hunger research has found that the perception of hunger depends not only on organic factors, but is also controlled by psychological, cognitive, and learning factors.

The neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain can be reduced when we are confronted with unfavorable emotions such as stress, anxiety, depression, nervousness, or anger. Serotonin plays an important role in regulating mood and reducing stress. A lack of serotonin can cause us to crave food as a supplement.

When in a bad mood, people often tend to consume large amounts of sugary foods, as sugar promotes serotonin production in the brain. However, this mood-related eating behavior can lead to weight gain, as it is often associated with overeating.

Hunger haunts people, but angels protect them, and the image of the "angel of hunger" has elements of both torment and comfort[5]. In addition, the appearance of the "hunger angels," who devoured everything edible and inedible in the camps, had serious consequences in the form of hunger and left an indelible shadow in people's memories, leading to psychological trauma. The book describes the following:

That happened to me sometimes in the early days. It saps the strength you need to shovel. The heart shovel notices immediately when I'm not fully with it. Then a thin panic constricts my throat. The naked two-stroke knocks in my temples. It grabs my pulse like a pack of klaxons. I am on the verge of collapse, my uvula swells in my sweet palate. And the angel of hunger hangs itself in my mouth, on my soft palate. It is its scales. It puts my eyes on, and the heart shovel becomes dizzy, the coal blurs. The angel of hunger places my cheeks on his chin. He lets my breath swing. The swing of my breath is delirium, and what delirium it is. [4]

This passage describes the physical pain caused by hunger when the "angel of hunger" appears. The personification of the "heart shovel" as a work tool is a clever linguistic device that illustrates that the main character, Leopold, is unable to concentrate on his work because of hunger. The protagonist's inner turmoil and fear of hunger are illustrated by the statement "A slight panic would constrict my throat." Hunger causes people's thoughts and actions to unconsciously take an undesirable direction. Even the main character cannot escape the clutches of the devil. This is the magic of the

"angel of hunger." "The naked two-stroke knocks in my temples." Exaggeratedly expressed, this describes the severe headaches that "I" felt due to hunger, as if a machine were roaring in my head. The end result is that "The angel of hunger rests his chin on my cheeks. He makes my breath sway," which caused "me" endless pain and helplessness. This type of hunger is the physiological hunger mentioned above: after the stomach and small intestine have been emptied, the stomach lining begins to contract, stimulating the nerve endings and activating the body's hunger mechanism. At the same time, the production of intestinal hormones such as ghrelin (growth hormone-releasing peptide) increases, sending signals to the brain that indicate the need to eat. When the brain receives these signals, it creates a feeling of hunger and encourages the person to eat. The "I" cannot get food and must suffer in pain.

Psychological torture was another purpose of the "hunger angels." While hunger deprived people in the camps of their sensory experiences, psychological hunger was its deeper purpose. The most effective way to destroy a person's psychological defenses is to create fear. This fear could penetrate every corner of the human body, whether in the tiny capillaries or the hard palate, whether in the sensitive stomach or the robust chest cavity, no one was immune to it. The high intensity of the work in the concentration camps was physically and mentally exhausting and made it difficult to maintain normal logical thinking. The "angels of hunger" knew this and used this exhaustion to break people's spirits. This tactic is expressed in the so-called "radicalization method." [6] The most immediate effect of this method is to make people do whatever it takes to eliminate hunger. "Hunger is always there. Because it is there, it comes when it wants and how it wants. The causal principle is the work of the angel of hunger. When it comes, it comes strong... 1 shovel lift = 1 gram of bread." Müller describes this sentence as a metaphor: one heart shovel equals one gram of bread, and only by lifting the shovel powerfully can one obtain food and temporarily satisfy one's hunger. Human appetite can only be satisfied through hard work. In this way, the "angel of hunger" achieves its goal of tormenting the human psyche. Under the rule of the "angel of hunger," everyone fights for food. After all, one shovel only yields one gram of bread. It is difficult to imagine how much effort and sweat people have to expend every day to fill their stomachs and protect themselves from the "angel of hunger."

2.3 "Hunger Angel" in the Concentration Camps

The "angel of hunger" is the central theme of *Atemschaukel* and appears in various chapters of the text: Meldekraut, Cement, Lime Women, Heart Shovel, Coal, Potato Man Coal, Potato Man, etc. The "angel of hunger" appears 83 times in this work, the word "hunger" 123 times, and two chapters are even titled "Vom Hungerengel" (From the Angel of Hunger). The frequency of the word "hunger" is high enough to show the importance of the theme of hunger in this work. Instead of telling the story of the main character Leopold and the work of the others in the concentration camp, *Atemschaukel* tells the story of the struggle against hunger. Leopold's life in the concentration camp revolves around "food." Not only does he think about food constantly during the day, he also thinks about food while he works, and at night food even haunts him in his dreams. Leopold is so obsessed with food that he is willing to sacrifice himself for it. But even though he thinks about food all day long, the "angel of hunger" is always with him and never leaves him alone. In the labor camp, almost everything revolves around food: the avenue of the camp smells like caramel, the wooden fences look like sweet dried fruit, the steam pipes smell like vanilla balls, the slag looks like tomato soup, the coke ovens look like melons, and the foreman's gate looks like scrambled eggs. Even the streets of the labor camp were named after various foods by Leopold [7].

In "Atemschaukel," Müller uses poetic language to portray "hunger" as "hunger angels." However, this title does not symbolize real angels, but rather the power of the devil. The existence of the "hunger angels" makes the events in the labor camps particularly tragic and cruel.

Müller uses the image of the angel of hunger to express the fear of death. In this novel, "hunger" leads to death, and the "angel of hunger" resembles the "angel of death" and the "devil" that constantly threatened the people in the concentration camps. The "angel of hunger" resembles the "angel of death" and the "devil" who constantly threatened the people in the concentration camps. The threat of death led to several famines. In "The Criminal Case with the Bread," Albert Gion was strong-willed enough to save five loaves of bread five days in a row. After work, however, he discovered that the bread was missing, stolen by the hungry Karli Halmen. Albert could not hide his anger and immediately hit him three times. Everyone rushed at him, and "I" was inspired by to commit murder until the guards arrived. Another example is the chapter "From Own Bread to Cheek Bread," in which "I" explains at the beginning that "Everyone falls into the bread trap. Into the trap of steadfastness at breakfast, into the trap of bread exchange at dinner, into the trap of night with the saved bread under your head. The worst trap of the angel of hunger is the trap of steadfastness: being hungry and having bread, but not eating it." [4] Because of hunger, everyone hopes to exchange a larger piece of bread in someone else's hand before dinner. This is called bread exchange, which takes place because of hunger.

The "Hunger Angel" is present everywhere and nowhere, which gives it access to the most intimate part of humanity-human nature. Its control over human nature profoundly influences people's perceptions and judgments. The "Hunger Angel" is considered an accomplice of human evil. The lawyer Paul Gast watches over his wife like a guard, and as soon as she looks away, his spoon wanders into her bowl. When his wife catches him, he says, "spoon here, spoon there [4]." Heidrun's face was already as hungry as that of a dead monkey. The spoon wandered into her bowl as long as she didn't notice, not only her husband's, but also the other workers'. For a person who is already starving, this may no longer matter. Death is only a matter of time. After I had drunk all the soup from her bowl, Heidrun wiped the

spoon clean as if he had eaten his fill. The lawyer still stares at his wife's soup bowl until one day she can no longer get up. In the midst of famine, humanity has disappeared and the only question that remains is how to obtain more food to fight hunger.

In summary, the "angel of hunger" is a symbol of death and the ugliness of human nature. The depiction of the "angels of hunger" shows the harshness of life in the concentration camp. The appearance of the angels of hunger is both a threat and an incentive, pushing everyone to their limits and at the same time awakening the desire for a better life.

3. The Causes of Hunger

In *Atemschaukel*, people find themselves in a fearful and depressing environment. They are confronted with different people and things, and there is a distinct feeling of alienation between them. In other words, the "hunger angel" controls different people and leads them to self-alienation, which results in confrontational thoughts.

3.1 Karl Marx's Concept of Alienation

But what exactly does alienation mean? Alienation is a profound philosophical and sociological concept that refers to the separation and opposition between an individual and their essence, activity, or product. In academia, there are various approaches to interpreting this term. The subject, in its contradictory development, produces its own opposite, the object, which rises above the subject as an external, alien force and turns around to bind and oppress the subject, which is "alienation." [8] The explanation of alienation was first published in Germany. The concept of alienation was coined by Hegel and other German philosophers. Today, the concept of alienation is used by Marx, who adopted it from Hegel and refined it from Feuerbach.

Marx formulated the concept of alienated labor in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, which were unpublished during his lifetime and represent Marx's first major political-economic work, published only in 1932. "product, the result, the necessary consequence" of alienated labour and the "means by which labour alienates itself." [9] Marx recognized that the worker produces the growing private property of the capitalist, who exploits the worker with it. Private property is therefore a product of alienated labor as well as a means by which the alienation of labor is reproduced. Workers therefore not only produce a growing number of goods that are alien to them, but also reproduce the wage labor relationship that exploits them and the commodification of their labor. With the ongoing "exploitation of the material world," the "devaluation of the human world" increases in direct proportion to it. The more wealth the worker produces, the poorer he becomes. The alienation caused by the wage labor relationship between worker and capitalist manifests itself in four forms:

1. The worker is confronted with the product of his labor as a foreign entity and independent power. The product of his labor does not belong to him, but to someone else.
2. The worker's own activity is a foreign activity that does not belong to him. Work does not satisfy the worker's needs; it serves only as a means to satisfy needs outside of work, so that work is avoided like a plague unless there is material compulsion. The external nature of work is evident in the fact that the expenditure of labor does not belong to the worker, but to someone else.
3. Both the generic character of man, free and conscious activity, and his generic life, the cultivation of the environment and society, are impossible for the worker; his generic nature is alienated from him.
4. An immediate consequence of the alienation of the product of labor, activity, and human beings is the alienation of people from each other. [10]

In this chapter, the causes of hunger in *Atemschaukel* are examined and analyzed on the basis of four manifestations of alienation.

3.2 The Alienation of the Products of Labor

People in labor camps experience alienation from the products of their labor. Forced to work in inhumane conditions, they are deprived of the fruits of their labor, which means they cannot enjoy the satisfaction and fulfillment that their work brings. This feeling of deprivation exacerbates their hunger, as they cannot receive adequate reward and food for their work.

There were eight brigades on the construction site. They dug foundations, hauled cinder blocks and cement bags, mixed the lime milk and concrete mixture, poured the foundations, made mortar for the bricklayers, carried it on stretchers, pushed it onto the scaffolding with wheelbarrows, and plastered the walls. The six houses were all built at the same time, with people running back and forth, everything in disarray, and almost nothing getting done. [4]

In the labor camps, the workers performed physically demanding tasks, such as mining coal and building infrastructure. However, the fruits of their labor do not remain with the workers, but are handed over to the camp manager or the state apparatus. Their hard work merely serves the needs of the camp and the state, while they themselves derive no benefit from it and receive no financial remuneration. The amount of food they are given is extremely small and does not meet minimum standards.

3.3 The Alienation of the Work Process

Alienation in the work process is equally significant. In the labor camps, the work is not intended for the workers themselves and does not satisfy any of their needs, starting with their physical needs. The workers in the labor camps perform heavy physical labor every day, but their food rations are meager and they often go hungry, and their nutrient and calorie intake is far from sufficient to meet their basic physiological needs. Secondly, their mental needs are neglected. In the labor camps, the workers have no dignity and are insulted just for filling a bottle with the daily vegetable soup. He walked down the promenade like a man possessed, and I followed him like a condemned man. I asked him what I should say. Without turning around, he made a dismissive gesture as if to say, "I'm not getting involved." Shishchvanyonov yelled. Tur could have saved himself the trouble of translating; I already knew it all by heart. That I am a fascist, a spy, a saboteur, and a pest, that I have no culture and am betraying the camp, the Soviet power, and the Soviet people with stolen cabbage soup. [4]

3.4 Alienation from Oneself

In labor camps, people's work behavior becomes mechanized and they lose their autonomy and creativity, which contradicts the essence of human beings, namely free and conscious work. This alienated work not only robs them of their freedom, but also robs them of their enthusiasm and hope for life, which further intensifies their hunger mentally.

The first reason is the coercive nature of the work. Workers in labor camps have no freedom to choose their work. They are forced to perform all kinds of heavy and dangerous physical labor and must obey the camp's instructions whether they want to or not. This coercion robs them of their autonomy over their work. The second point is the futility of the work. The work of the workers in the labor camps has no personal meaning or value; they work only to keep the camps running and to satisfy the needs of the outside world. This feeling of futility makes the workers feel that their efforts are in vain and that they cannot derive any sense of success or satisfaction from their work. Finally, there is the controlled nature of time. Working hours are long and fixed, and those in labor camps are long and inflexible. Workers' time is strictly controlled and planned, and they cannot freely dispose of their time; they can only work according to the camp's schedule and lose control over their time.

3.5 The Alienation of People from Each Other

Alienation between people is also an important cause of hunger. In the pressure-filled and fear-filled environment of the labor camps, mutual support and emotional communication between people are seriously weakened, and people become isolated. This alienation of interpersonal relationships causes people to feel very empty and lonely mentally and emotionally, and this feeling of emptiness is also a manifestation of "hunger." The labor camps are extremely harsh environments with enormous pressure to survive, where everyone fights for their own survival. This environment leads to a lack of basic trust between people, mutual distrust, and even mutual betrayal in order to receive preferential treatment from the administration or to avoid punishment. In this construction site gloom, everyone suspects everyone else of carrying the lighter end of the cement bag, of exploiting them and taking it easy on themselves. Everyone is humiliated by the shouting, betrayed by the cement, cheated by the construction site [4]. The second phenomenon is that people exploit each other, and in a situation of extreme resource scarcity for survival, interpersonal relationships have become utilitarian. Relationships between people are exploitative rather than based on sincerity and mutual help. For example, in order to obtain food or avoid hard work, some people have to establish some kind of relationship with people in power or managers. The third manifestation is the loss of a sense of belonging: as a result of many years of segregation and oppression, people have lost their sense of belonging to their families, they feel abandoned by society and cannot reintegrate into normal social life. When Leopold returns to his hometown, he feels like a stranger, even though his memories have not changed. His father hides his pity when he sees "me" eating, but it is only pity. He realizes that he has become estranged from his family, and to avoid harm, he becomes a cold person.

4. Conclusion

Through a multidimensional interpretation of the theme of hunger in *Atemschaukel*, we can clearly see that the "hunger" depicted by Herta Müller is a complex and profound overarching metaphor. It has its origins in the physiological cramps of the stomach and ultimately permeates every corner of the soul, becoming an eternal state of being. The "angel of hunger" is thus more than just a personification of hunger; it is an accomplice to the exercise of power within totalitarian systems, the most brutal expression of alienated labor in the life of the individual. In the carefully constructed alienating space of the concentration camp, the workers stood in complete contradiction to their own products, their work activities, their very essence, and even their fellow prisoners. This deep alienation not only fueled physical hunger, but also represented a spiritual "hunger"-a thirst for dignity, freedom, and belonging.

Through his uniquely poetic yet fractured language, Müller crystallizes this forgotten history and the traumatic memory of the individual. The story of Leopold and his companions warns us that when a system systematically deprives people of their basic needs and degrades them to tools, hunger is no longer a natural phenomenon, but becomes a political instrument and a human purgatory. Even after physical survival, the fear and alienation caused by the "angel of hunger" resonates relentlessly like a "breathing swing" through the lives of the survivors and refuses to stop. Thus, this study is not only an interpretation of a literary work, but also a profound examination, through the mirror of literature, of historical violence, power structures, and the resilience of the human spirit.

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