



## THE TRILOGY OF GERMAN WRITER HANS-ULRICH TREICHEL: BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION

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### Abstract:

Hans-Ulrich Treichel is a German contemporary writer born in the Western part of the then divided Germany. The research paper primarily deals with his trilogy which constitutes *Lost (Der Verlorene)* (1998), *A Man's Flight (Menschenflug)* (2005) and *Anatolin (Anatolin)* (2008). In his trilogy, he addresses memory and trauma of the flight and expulsion of the Germans which he claims to be significantly absent from the German post-war literary landscape. Therefore, Treichel's *Lost* (1998) is considered as a ground-breaking novel which brings the long-repressed German personal memory into the German collective memory discourse. The trilogy focuses on the trauma and sufferings of the Germans towards the end of war who were until late 1980's primarily labelled as perpetrators of the war and were infamous for their barbaric actions in the Second World War. On one hand the trilogy represents that the German civilians were also the sufferers in the Second World War, shifting the accent of the contemporary German memory discourse. On the other hand, it also revolves around the childhood trauma of the post-war generation who were born in 1950's in then divided German State in an atmosphere of unknown guilt, shame and awkward silence. This research paper argues that the trilogy of the German writer, Hans-Ulrich Treichel is an amalgam of his life experience and fiction. Furthermore, the function of the autobiographical style of writing of the fictional narratives of Treichel is investigated. The reception of these fictional narratives which are heavily loaded with reality of author's life is also explored in this paper.

**Key Words:** Hans-Ulrich Treichel, Flight and Expulsions of Germans, Memory, Trauma, Non-fiction, Autobiography & Post-War Germany.

At the end of the Second World War, approximately 50 million people were displaced in Europe. These populations primarily included victims of the Nazi crimes but also the ethnic Germans who had to relocate as a result of shifting borders. The Conference in Potsdam in 1945 ceded the eastern part of pre-war Germany to Poland and Czechoslovakia, forcing the Germans who had lived there to relocate. Towards the end of the World War II, as the Red Army marched westward and the Allies shifted Europe's borders, approximately 12-14 million ethnic Germans, mainly from Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Baltic region fled to either escape the approaching Red Army which was raping and pillaging or were expelled from their *Heimat* or homelands. The uprooted Germans fled to the present day Germany, where they faced the challenge of rebuilding their lives in the war-torn society. Later in 1950's the 'Economic Miracle' in the Federal Republic of Germany enabled the refugees and expellees to integrate socially and politically. However, the experience of losing their *Heimat* homeland and the subsequent effort to integrate in the new surroundings pivotally impacted the lives of these people. It was not only difficult for an individual but also for the society as a whole to balance the feelings of mourning over the past and simultaneously move on. The two-fold process of creating a new sense of home and simultaneously mourning the loss of the home that was, was common among these Germans. Living in two different worlds, physically and mentally, painfully different from one another created problems that they would not even acknowledge to themselves. The 'normal and unaffected' behavior and the obsession of Germans with their work during the time of 'Economic Miracle' in West Germany were symptoms of the same. Even though past and present were connected at individual and collective levels, discussion about this aspect of German history remained a taboo theme in post-war Germany. Because of their so-called successful political and economic integration by the end of the 1950's and a change in the political climate in the Federal Republic of Germany in the mid-sixties, the German expellees and refugees were hardly ever mentioned in the public discourse. Post-War German Literature in West and East Germany has many facets. But certain events like the expulsion and the trauma of millions of German expellees and refugees, rape of German women by Soviet troops during their escape towards the West and carpet bombing of German cities by Allies towards the end of World War II are markedly absent from the Post-War German literary canon.

It is only in late 1990's that the fate of German expellees is finally explored in literature. Treichel is one of the pioneer authors, who thematized the trauma of the German civilians towards the end of Second World War in the contemporary German literature and thus, not only breached the taboo with his writings, but also given new impetus to the discussion on the memory of inhuman expulsion of the German civilians from Eastern Europe towards the end of Second World War in the contemporary German memory discourse. He belongs to the post-war generation who played a significant role in bringing this side of German history into the German intellectual debates. In his trilogy which constitutes *Lost (Der Verlorene)* 1998, *A Man's Flight*

*(Menschenflug)*(2005) and *Anatolin (Anatolin)* (2008) he addresses not only the theme of trauma of German civilians during escape from the Eastern Europe towards the end of Second World War, but also its everlasting and adverse impact on the next generation. *Lost* Hans-Ulrich Treichel's first best-seller which revolves around the fate of a German family whose occupation was farming in East Prussia during the Second World War. They lost their first-born child on 20 January 1945 on their route to West as they tried to escape the Soviet troops which were approaching from the East. The flight from east not only resulted in the loss of their son and *Heimater* homeland, but also rape of the mother of the narrator by Soviet soldiers. The story is narrated by a 13-year-old second child of the family who is born in the post-war times and lives with his parents in the western part of then divided Germany in the time of economic miracle. One day the mother breaks her silence and reveals the narrator that his elder brother did not starve to death but was 'lost' during the flight. Their existence in their new homeland is overshadowed by the haunting memories of his parents of the traumatic experiences on the journey which includes life threatening encounter with the Soviet soldiers and the rape of his mother. Because of the traumatic past of the parents, the narrator was brought up in an atmosphere of shame and guilt and has a neglected childhood. The presence of the narrator in the family is eclipsed by the absence of his elder brother. The adolescent senses a serious crisis in the family. It is through the eyes of the 13-year old narrator that we experience how the parents try, in vain, to find their lost child and cope up with the traumatic events of the past.

After *Lost*, Treichel primarily focused on the trauma and identity crisis of the post-war generation in the other two novels of his trilogy. In *A Man's Flight*, a middle-aged man named Stephan is tortured with strange anxieties and nightmares few months before his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday. He also suffers from obsessive fantasies that he would die after two years just as his father died at the age of 54. These thoughts affect him deeply. The extra diegetic narrator which narrates the story of Stephan in third person tells the readers that Stephan's parents were also German expellees who lost their homeland and first born child on their route towards West towards the end of Second World War. As the narrator of *Lost*, Stephan's childhood was also dominated by his lost elder brother, silence and dejection. In order to come to terms with his past, he disassociates himself from his family's past and his painful childhood memories. It is only in his fifties that he feels the urge to discover himself, engage with his family's past and confront the phantom of his childhood. Therefore, he takes a break from his family life and engages himself with the mementos of his parents. Furthermore, Stephan wrote a fictional novel loaded with childhood memories named *Lost*, in order to overcome the alienation from his childhood and to give words to the silence of his parents in his childhood. He thought writing would work as a therapy and will help him find his way back to normal life. However, there is no happy end and he is doomed to a life of anxieties. The story ends with a dilemma that even though he wants to overcome his haunting childhood memories, he is not prepared to come face-to-face with the phantom of his past.

*Anatolin*, the third novel of Treichel's trilogy portrays the effect of childhood trauma and its relationship with personal memory and identity crisis. In *Anatolin*, the narrator suffers from 'Morbisbiographicus'. The symptom of which is that one does not have any memory of his childhood; the person feels as if he never had any childhood. The narrator has a similar traumatic childhood as depicted in the other two novels. But in this novel, he hardly has any memory of his childhood which leads to identity crisis of the narrator. He wrote two novels filled with his biographical facts named *Lost* and *A Man's Flight*, in order to deal with his childhood trauma and to reconstruct his family past. The first-person narrative voice asserts that the writing of these two novels helped him gain the courage to find his lost brother forty years after the war. With the help of Red Cross, he gets to know about the foundling 2307 which could be his lost brother. Furthermore, he has voids in his memory and to fill those voids he travels through the native country of his parents which are now in present day Ukraine and Poland. During the course of his journey, he tries to reconstruct his memories, but the end shows his inability to do so. Although, the first-person narrator aims to reconstruct his past when he travels through his mother's homeland Anatolin, the journey ends in disappointment as the place does not really bear any traces of the past of his family. Besides, the negative DNA test report with foundling 2307 shatters his hopes to reunite with his lost brother.

The trilogy of Treichel depicts not only the horrific time of flight and expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe at the end of Second World War, but it also portray sits aftermath. When seen from the perspective of post-war generation, the trilogy could be understood as an attempt to reconstruct the past which they never experienced, but which was omnipresent in their childhood. The narrative does not emphasize how the war-generation experienced the collapse of the Third Reich, but how these events were trickled down and processed in the family circle in the post-war Germany and also how does such experiences affect the subsequent generation. Therefore, these works of Treichel are concerned primarily not with the war, but with the trauma in the post-war period. Basically, the trilogy represents the subconscious transmission of trauma from war generation to post-war generation which is termed as trans-generational trauma. (Weigel, 1999)

#### **A Fine Line between Fact and Fiction in Treichel's Trilogy:**

Hans-Ulrich Treichel is born in 1952 in Versmold which was a small town in the western part of then divided Germany. His parents shared the fate with the millions of German civilians who fled from East Prussia

towards the end of Second World War. On their route towards West Germany, his parents lost their first born child Günter Treichel. (Treichel, 2000). The loss of their child and their homeland, along with the humiliation by the soviet troops caused an emotional shock which impacted rest of their lives. In the post-war times, his parents were unable to express and share their loss and pain with anyone. Treichel emphasizes that because of this specific behavior of his parents, his childhood was filled with silence, emptiness and fragmented stories. Moreover, his parents in their new homeland in the time of economic miracle in western Germany directed all their energies towards work, so as to suppress their memories and live only in the present. Treichel asserts that in Versmold his parents have repressed their memories not only of the traumatic experiences, but also past in general. According to Treichel, they never talked about their childhood and about their parents. Because of which Treichel in his childhood and even in his later life experienced a sense of rootlessness and forlornness. Moreover, they did not tell the truth about his brother Günter. They said that Günter was starved and died on the route towards western Germany. Treichel got to know about his lost brother and the sufferings of his parents during expulsion only after their death through the acquired documents of his parents. His childhood was filled with unknown guilt and an atmosphere of shame and silence. He lacks any personal memory of the horrors experienced by his parents during the escape from East Prussia and has only second-hand and fragmented memories. According to Treichel, his childhood was only a dead and empty phase in a family which was lacking any kind of biographical history and lineage. (Basker, 2004, p. 13) In addition to that, he never felt belonged to his family and his society, as he was born in Versmold, a small province in western part of then divided Germany, but his parents were from East Prussia. The feeling of alienation was so deep ingrained in his personality that he did not share any emotional bond with his birth place and with his family. (Treichel, 2005, p. 47)

The life experiences of Hans-Ulrich Treichel and the protagonists in his trilogy are very much similar. Both of them are born in a small province of Westphalia in western part of then divided Germany. The father of Treichel and his protagonists' fathers came from a German settlement named Bryszcze in East Prussia which is now located in the present day Ukraine. Similarly, Treichel's mother and the mothers of the protagonists in the trilogy, both are from a small village called Anatolin in Warthegau which is now located in present day Poland. Not only the figures of his novels and his family share the same family background, but they also share the same fate. As the figures of his novels, Treichel's parents also fled from a small village named Rakowiec in East Prussia towards the end of Second World War and lost their first born child on their route towards West. In post-war Germany, his parents secretly tried to find his lost brother with the help of Red Cross. They underwent a lot of body measurement tests to verify parentage to the foundling who was alleged to be his lost brother. Treichel, as the protagonists in *A Man's Flight* and *Anatolin* got to know about all this through the documents of his parents which were acquired by him only after their deaths. In addition to that, Treichel's childhood as that of his protagonists of his novels was also stuffed with silence and the feeling of unknown guilt and shame. (Treichel, 2000, p. 28) In order to overcome the phantom of his past and complete his family history, he travelled to the homelands of his parents. He even uses the exact words of his father's official written statement which was sent to Red Cross in order to request to find his lost son and was acquired by Treichel only after the death of his parents in *A Man's Flight*. (Treichel, 2000, p. 25; Treichel, 2005b, p. 30)

Although Treichel's trilogy makes reference to his real life, it is primarily fictional in nature and is not considered an autobiography. According to Philippe Lejeune's the autobiographical pact (Lejeune, 1999), in an autobiography the narrator, author and protagonist are one and the same and the most important signifier of an autobiography is the first-person narrative. Although *Lost* and *Anatolin* are narrated by a first-person narrator, but that does not qualify them to be an autobiography. Not only a lot of incidents and characters are fictional, but Treichel himself urges the readers not to confuse his protagonist with himself. He claims that although the narrative approach of the novels may look like autobiographical, but they are not. He adds that he does not possess anything autobiographical and therefore his novels primarily are an effort to contrive his autobiography. (Treichel, 2000, S. 110 et. seq.)

According to Treichel, childhood is the most important period for a writer. A writer draws his poetic craft from his past or primarily from his childhood experiences. He feels that the emptiness of his childhood urged him to write and become an author. By writing a fictional trilogy based on his life experiences, he makes his childhood emptiness poetically productive, as he fills the emptiness of his childhood with anecdotes. Furthermore, writing for him has a therapeutic effect as according to him, it helped him fill the empty room of his past. Through writing the novels, he reconstructs and also reframes his past and his family's past which in reality his parents never shared with him.

#### **Conclusion:**

Through his trilogy, Treichel tells a specific episode of German history as it was never told before. He seeks to give words to the silence of his childhood, reconstruct his family history and attempt to piece together his fragmented memory and identity through his novels. He fictionalizes his life history and thereby the novels help him explore and reconstruct his family past which he considered painful phantom throughout his life. Although, the blending of fiction and historical realities is a common practice by writers of any genre, but

Treichel's fictional trilogy which is heavily loaded with the biographical instances of its writer stands out because it confuses the reader and forces him to compare Treichel with his protagonists. Therefore, the reader seeks for authenticity and is urged to find out which part is pure invention and which one is from Treichel's life. In this context, Treichel's request that the readers should free the trilogy from biographical burden and perceive it only as a piece of literary work, relieves the confusions of readers a bit.

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