

## Günter Grass: A Socio-Political Writer and his Texts on India

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### Abstract

So as to appreciate the Socio-Political influence in the creative writings of Günter Grass in general and in his texts on India in particular, one has to look into his life history. I have based my paper on the biography of Günter Grass written by Michael Jürgs, research publications by Monika Shafi and Vibha Surana, some newspaper articles following his publications on India & after Grass' death, an Interview with Grass and also Grass' three books containing his travel impressions on India. The books authored by Grass are (titles translated in English): 'Headborns or the Germans are dying out', 'The Flounder' and 'Show your tongue'. Born in the Free City of Danzig, North Poland, Grass' eye witnessed the Third Reich in all its extremes. He even worked for Waffen SS, as a 17 year old boy. As a result of terrible experiences during the Third Reich, Grass was socio-politically motivated and he was eager to draw peoples' attention towards the mistakes committed before, during and after the Second World War and to contribute towards transforming this world into a more humane one through his writing as well as by his own active participation.

### Preliminary Note

"These are the true experiences, which he imparts. People don't forget that: the stagnant smell of the cesspool over the staked wooden shacks, the flies, the rats, cramped living conditions and hospitality of the 12-headed cheerful family..."

[Original Text in German: Es sind wahre Erlebnisse, die er vermittelt. So was vergißt man nicht: den stehenden Gestank der Sumpfkloake über dem aufgefähten Bretterbudengewirr, die Fliegen, die Ratten, die Enge und die Gastfreundschaft der zwölköpfig heiteren Familie ... (Grass 2006: 46)]

"He memorizes the words: "People lying as if dead. He says. And this I should have discovered? Vasco makes a futile effort to forbid himself, to find the sleeping people like dead bodies beautiful which are well-arranged by chance or by a different law. If he wanted to lie down tired in between, he would fall out clumsily."

[Original Text in German: Er merkt sich das Wort: Todschläfer. Er sagt. Und das soll ich entdeckt haben? Vergeblich verbietet sich Vasco, die vom Zufall oder einem anderen Gesetz geordneten Schlafleichen schön zu finden. Wollte er sich müde dazwischen legen, fiel er ungeschickt raus. (Grass 2015: 225)]

"On the way to the Hong Kong Bank, we see a naked woman of uncertain age as if by chance covered with rags, leaning on a wall,

who is not noticed by anyone except us; and even we slow down our steps only for a moment of shock. Outcast of Outcasts. An omission, that she is alive."

[Original Text in German: Auf dem Weg zur Hong Kong-Bank sehen wir, an eine Mauer gelehnt, eine nackte, wie zufällig von Lumpen bedeckte Frau unbestimmten Alters, die außer von uns ... von niemandem wahrgenommen wird; und auch wir verlangsamen unseren Schritte nur eine Schrecksekunde lang. ... Augestoßen von Ausgestoßenen. Ein Versäumnis, daß sie noch lebt. (Grass 1988: 22)]

These reality based expressions of Günter Grass depict the photographic images of certain areas of Mumbai and Kolkata, which he visited during his first three tours of India in 1975, 1977 and 1986/87. These tours were an important source for his script "Headborns or the Germans are dying out (Original Title in German: Kopfgeburten oder die Deutschen sterben aus)", novel "the Flounder (Original Title in German: Der Butt)" and travel report "Show your tongue (Original Title in German: Zunge zeigen)".

In order to understand Grass' inclination towards depicting the real life in its most grotesque, distorted form, one has to analyze it on the basis of

1. Grass' early life and his youth
2. History of Germany during and post Second World War time.
3. Trends in German Literature and India's Image in it after the Second World War.

Günter Grass was born in 1927 in The Free City of Danzig, now called Gdansk, which lies on the Baltic Coast in Poland. Grass is one of the authors, who experienced the Third Reich under Hitler in his childhood and youth. On the one hand, he witnessed the atrocities and horror perpetrated by the German forces, on the other hand they were exposed to an aggressive propaganda, which glorified the idea of National Socialism as the only way out to lead a respectable life and influenced the impressionable minds of the youth considerably in the absence of any other alternative. How the education was distorted to malign influence the young minds, can be realized from one of topics of Essay writing in the school i.e. "Why are the Jews our disaster?" [Original Topic in German: Warum sind die Juden unser Unglück (Jürgs 2002: 45)]. The adverse effect of the toxic education was that most of the children were not interested in art and history, but wanted to go to the War instead to decimate the Jews. Even the Church didn't protest against Nazis. "Moreover, he never heard a critical word against Nazis from the Catholic side, I still remember the Concluding Prayers, in which our brave soldiers ... were included in the Intercessory Prayers." [Original Text in German: Allerdings hat der von katholischer Seite nie ein kritisches Wort gegen die Nazis gehört, ich habe noch die Schlußgebete im Kopf, in denen unsere tapferen Soldaten ... in die Fürbitten mit eingeschlossen wurden. (Jürgs 2002: 25)]. When Grass was drafted into military services of the 'Wehrmacht' in 1944, he was not worried but, on the contrary excited. He served the armed forces till the end of World War II, when he was arrested by the American army. Three challenges he

had after the release from captivity - a roof, food for survival and finally the whereabouts of his parents and his sister. Destiny took Grass to Göttingen railway station, where he met a schoolmate of his childhood. This boy told him about the possibility of completing schooling. Grass could also stay with this schoolmate.

However, his history teacher's indifference towards the Wartime and rather an effort to write it off appalled him to the extent that he walked out of the class, which meant the end to the formal learning for the author. Again he met an earlier acquaintance, who showed him the way to a salt mine nearby, where he was supposed to interconnect the loaded drams at a level nine hundred fifty meter deep in the mine. He went regularly to the town hall, where Red Cross would put the latest lists of the missing people. One day, he found a name known to him from Danzig, who knew a lead to Grass' family and found for him the address too. Grass met the family and left again after three weeks, because the father and the son were of different opinions on a prospective career for Günter Grass. Grass headed for Düsseldorf, where he wanted to learn sculpture. The creative writing later on was a consequent development in Grass: poems, drama and finally novel. "The constantly vigilant Self-Educator (Günter Grass) taught himself the pure handicraft of writing" [Original Text in German: *Das reine Handwerk des Schreibens hat sich der stets wachsame Autodidakt selbst beigebracht.* (Jürs 2002: 80)]. Two incidents of the year 1955 indicate once again the turning point in the life of Günter Grass, namely the third prize of the 'Süddeutscher Rundfunk' for his poem 'Lilien aus Schlaf' and the subsequent invitation from Hans Werner Richter for a Reading before 'Gruppe 47'. They introduced him to a new career as poet and writer. However, he registered his presence in the literary world with his first novel 'The Tin Drum' (Original Title in German: *Die Blechtrommel*).

#### **A Short Background of History of Literature**

The middle of the nineteenth century saw a radical transformation in German literature. Influenced by the March Revolution of 1848, industrialization, economic crisis and scientific development, the simple bourgeois life and its realistic depiction became the central theme for the writers. The travel reports of Germans on India till the beginning of the twentieth century however continued to cherish the romantic image of India established by the German philosophers.

"By the middle of the nineteenth century, German scholars were regarded as the leading authorities in Indology. Around the same time, the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) made traveling to India easier and faster and allowed for a firsthand impression of the country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Germany witnessed nothing short of an Indienmode, as documented in the immensely popular novel *Indienfahrt* (Waldemar Bonsels), who spent about a year in the country." (Shafi 1997: 42)

The end of the Second World War saw a divided Germany with ruined cities, starvation and above all with a shadow of the lost war. Post-War-German-

Literature was divided too. This division was on the one hand politically induced in the East and West Germany. The other division in literature took place between 'the authors in internal exile' who stayed in Germany during the war, but distanced themselves from 'the National Socialism' and 'the authors in external exile' who partially returned to Germany after the end of the war. Most of the writers took refuge into the conservative literature. They did not want to be reminded of the War period. Their writings were categorized as the "Literature of Zero Hour" (German: Literatur der Stunde Null). However there were still some writers, who refused to bow down to the majority (of writers). Günter Grass was one such writer. The West Germany of the Sixties and Seventies of the twentieth century witnessed two major movements: The Movement of 1968, a student movement against Authoritarianism and Hypocrisy of the Government and Pop journalism, a subjective portrayal of facts. Both the trends are clearly visible in the travel literature of second half of the twentieth century.

India's Freedom immediately after the End of Second World War was another important event of middle of the twentieth century. Coupled with the trends in Germany, it brought about a major change in depiction of the travel impressions, when travelers wrote about India. The day to day life became important to the writers. "The historically important forties ... mark a caesura in the German Travel Literature on India. The first hand Indian experience, which enabled evermore travel to India, was followed by realistic travel literature." [Original Text in German: Die historisch bedeutsamen vierziger Jahre ... markieren auch eine Zäsur in der deutschen Reiseliteratur über Indien. Auf Indieneerfahrung aus erster Hand, die die zunehmenden Reisen nach Indien ermöglichten, folgte realistische Reiseliteratur. (Surana 2009: 142)]

### **Socio-Political Engagements of Günter Grass**

As Grass refused to study the teaching of history of the recent past and left school, he stood again at the railway station of Göttingen with same worries, where to live and eat and how to find the family. He got a job in a salt mine nearby, where he was required to interconnect the loaded drams at a level nine hundred fifty meter deep in the mine. Power cut was a common phenomenon, which provided the workers an opportunity to relax in the dark and to talk about the politics as well as the past. "In the shift there worked innocuous small Nazis, and there were bitter Communists and in between well-behaved social democrats." [Original Text in German: "Es arbeiteten in der Schicht harmlose kleine Nazis, und es waren da verbitterte Kommunisten und dazwischen brave Sozialdemokraten." (Jürgs 2002: 63)]. Within no time they were involved in fractious arguments, because Nazis and Communists preferred to skip the War and grouped against the social democrats. "Rather instinctively, Günter Grass sensed after the disputes in the mine, where did he belong to. Not to the lofty ideologists, but to the reticent social democrats." [Original Text in German: "Eher instinktiv hat Günter Grass nach den Disputen im Bergwerk gehaut, wohin er gehört. Nicht zu dem wortgewaltigen Ideologen, sondern zu den workkargen Sozialdemokraten,..." (Jürgs 2002: 64)]. One advice of a social democrat worker in the same salt mine impressed him the most: "you know, young man, if you

want to reform the world and change the people, you have to construct schools, schools, you listen..." [Original Text in German: „weißt du, Junge, wenn du die Welt verbessern und die Menschen ändern willst, musst du Schulen bauen, Schulen, hörst du..." (Jürgs 2002: 64)]. These words remained etched in his mind to the extent that he called for "construction of schools ... so many that remaining stupid becomes art..." [Original Text in German: 'Schulen bauen', ... so viele, daß blöd bleiben Kunst wird... (Jürgs 2002: 64)], when he later on appeared as speaker in public meetings for SPD - a German political party.

Grass never considered his birth year of 1927 as the mercy of late birth, on the contrary he confessed that he was too young for this blame, but not for shame. In his own words later on: "My age group is no reward, but an obligation." [Original Text in German: „Mein Jahrgang ist kein Verdienst, sondern eine Verpflichtung" (Jürgs 2002: 44)]. Grass paraphrased it: "that I am alive only by chance" [Original Text in German: "daß ich nur zufällig lebe" (Jürgs 2002: 54)] and saw it as his duty to speak in the name of those, who were killed in the War. He did not find himself free in the selection of material for his creative writing. He always felt that those who lost their lives during the War were watching him as well as his writings. According to Grass, "A writer ... is someone, who writes against the elapsing time" [Original Text in German: "Ein Schriftsteller ... ist jemand, der gegen die verstreichende Zeit schreibt" (Jürgs 2002: 58)]. He strongly opposed to the efforts that the epoch of Third Reich falls into oblivion. His first three novels, 'The Tin Drum' (Original Title in German: Die Blechtrommel), 'Cat and Maus' (Original Title in German: Katz und Maus) and Dog Years (Original Title in German: Hundejahre), which were later on called 'The Danzig Trilogy', have successfully dealt with the time before, during and after 'The Third Reich'. Grass aspired to represent the social issues against the ruling powers through his works, for example "The Plebians rehearse The Uprising" (Original Title in German: Plebejer proben den Aufstand). "The Rat" (Original Title in German: Die Rättin), a novel by Grass published in 1986, was "the literary effort, to describe a world, which will menace the grandchildren, if finally the change in thinking doesn't begin." [Original Text in German: "der literarische Versuch, eine Welt zu beschreiben, die den Enkeln droht, wenn nicht endlich das Umdenken beginnt" (Jürgs 2002: 352)].

He emphasized that writers must be politically active and represent their own viewpoints on issues of common interest effectively. He even criticized the young writers that they didn't like to express themselves on politics: "They should not repeat the mistakes of the Weimar Republic and keep themselves apart." [Original Text in German: "Sie sollten nicht die Fehler der Weimarer Republik wiederholen und sich in privater Distanz halten." (Spiegel Online: 2010)]. He was quite vocal against Germany's decision to deliver Submarine to Israel and published a prose poem "What must be said" (Original Title in German: Was gesagt werden muß). The sharp critique of the poem, he regarded as standardization of views and regretted: "It is evident to me that in a democratic country where the freedom of press reigns, a certain synchronization of opinion is the fore and a denial at all to respond to the content, to the issues, which I invoke." [Original Text in German: "Es ist mir aufgefallen, dass in einem

demokratischen Land, in dem Pressefreiheit herrscht, eine gewisse Gleichschaltung der Meinung im Vordergrund steht und eine Weigerung, auf den Inhalt, die Fragestellungen, die ich hier anführe, überhaupt einzugehen." (Spiegel Online 2012)]

### **Socio-Political Traits in the Grass' Texts on India**

Günter Grass visited India four times in 1975, 1978, 1986/87 and 2005. The slums, the miserable living conditions prevailing there and the apathy of the powerful as well as the intellectuals stirred him vigorously. Time and again, these dragged him to India and the issues became the main theme of his India-related authorial occupation. Some of the countless passages of his works on India, which express the intensity of his deploredness, needs to be mentioned here:

"They practice their hegemony ... with police and army force, with caste conceit and corruption, with all tools of power, which are delivered locally or gifted freely from the western armory." [Original Text in German: Sie üben ihre Herrschaft ... mit Polizei- und Armeegewalt, mit Kastendünkel und Korruption, mit allen Machtinstrumenten, die einheimisch überliefert sind oder aus westlichen Arsenalen freihaus geschenkt wurden. (Grass 2006: 50)]

"Vasco wants to memorize a scene: as on the flat field in front of the Fort, ... five hundred bodies are lying as if slain..." [Original Text in German: ... will sich Vasco ein Bild merken: wie auf dem platten Feld vor der Festung, ... fünfhundertkörper wie erschlagen liegen ... (Grass 2015: 225)]

"Why not a poem on the heap of shit, as God let it fall and called it Calcutta" [Original Text in German: Warum nicht ein Gedicht über den Haufen Scheiße, wie Gott ihn fallen ließ und Kalkutta nannte. (Grass 2015: 225)]

"Later on the way ... on foot: Misery, Cripple, who slog along on the stockings in leather caps over the cracked plaster. Mangy dogs. The transverse sleeper. Sidewalk over it!" [Original Text in German: „Später der Weg ... zu Fuß: Elend, Krüppel, die sich auf Strümpfen in Lederkappen übers geborstene Pflaster schleppen. Rüdige Hunde. Der querliegende Schläfer. Steig drüber weg!" (Grass 1988: 19)]

He levelled the criticism particularly against untenable conditions and that too in his speeches to Indian audience. During such a discourse in Delhi in 1975, he asked the listeners:

Is ... the Indian misery ... sheer ineradicable, because it is imposed by fate, destiny, Karma, then I will return home with bitter Enlightenment. Or is the Indian misery ... only an outcome of the Class and Caste rule, the mismanagement and corruption, then it should be removable, ... because it is work of man."

[Original Text in German: Ist ... das indische Elend ... schier unabänderlich, weil es Fatum, Schicksal, Karma verhängt ist, dann werde ich mit bitterer Erkenntnis heimkehren. Oder ist das indische Elend, ..., nur das Ergebnis der Klassen- und Kastenherrschaft, der Mißwirtschaft und Korruption, dann sollte es aufzuheben sein, ..., weil es Menschenwerk ist. (Ganeshan 1992: 231)]

It is difficult to judge, whether the restraint of listeners gives the imperation as if Grass had said something wrong or unpleasant. The social democrat in Günter

Grass did not allow him sit quietly. He did not give up and looked for new possibilities. He looked for people in the country to move them against the prevailing system. When Amitav Roy was rehearsing Grass' drama 'Plebejer proben den Aufstand', Grass fantasized of a similar play in a slum of Kolkata with Subhash Chandra Bose as central character. Amitav Roy however had reservations: "Günter Grass will conceptualize a political plot as alternative to the present situation. The government will definitely forbid it and we will face all kinds of difficulties." [Original Text in German: Günter Grass wird eine politische Handlung als Alternative zur gegenwärtigen Situation entwerfen. Mit Sicherheit wird es die Regierung verbieten und wir werden allerlei Schwierigkeiten bekommen. (Kämpchen 1999: 194)]

Not only the Indians but many German critics found Grass' misery descriptions as unjust. They were of the opinion that while making a one-sided detailed observations, the author has neglected certain aspects, which testify the multifaceted cultural life of the country.

"So there are published in the city of Rabindranath Tagore ... more than 700 literary journals and the both best daily newspapers of India; ... here exit around 1200 (!) theatre groups and ... 55 film clubs, ... still Kolkata the metropolitan of the Indian Art-Films: Satyajit Ray ('Pather Panchali') and Mrinal Sen ('Calcutta 71') live here and work, ... Grass has no interest for that; also not for Bengali Authors like Sunil Gangopadhyay and Kavita Sinha, whose works have been translated in German and English." [Original Text in German: So erscheinen in der Stadt Rabindranath Tagores ... über 700 Literaturzeitschriften und die beiden besten Tageszeitungen Indiens; ... existieren hier etwa 1200 (!) Theatertruppen und ... 55 Filmklubs, .. noch ist Kalkutta auch die Metropole des indischen Kunst-Films: Hier leben und arbeiten Satyajit Ray ("Auf der Straße") und Mrinal Sen ("Calcutta 71"), ... Kein Interesse dafür bei Grass; auch nicht für bengalische Schriftsteller wie Sunil Gangopadhyay und Kabita Sinha, von denen mehrere Texte ins Deutsche und Englische übersetzt sind. (Becker 1988: 162)]

Peter von Becker's questioning author's selection is valid, if author's depiction is far from reality and exaggerate dealing with facts. Wouldn't it be against basic principles of a democratic system to dictate an author, what he or she is supposed to write? Grass' main concern was to voice the people struggling against inhuman surviving circumstances. The already famous ones like Tagore, Satyajit Ray or Mrinal Sen and the others were not dependent on Grass' recognition.

### Concluding Remarks

The issue of poverty was lying at the heart of the social democrat and writer Günter Grass since his youth, when he was confronted by it in everyday life in his struggle for survival. During the third visit to India, Grass stayed mostly in Kolkata and got acquainted with Karlekar Family and its NGO 'Calcutta Social Project', which ran a school for slum children. After his return to Germany,

Grass founded a society by the name of 'Hilfe für Slum Schulen in Calcutta und Dakka Germany' and supported the school regularly. According to Netai Bera, who was associated with 'Calcutta Social Project' since 1984, remembered Günter Grass after Grass' death and told Shounak Ghosal: "...The royalty from his book 'Show your tongue' was directed to the children's welfare..." (Ghosal 2015).

On the expectations of Venkateshwar Ramaswamy, a socialist and a small industry owner, from Grass' book 'Zunge zeigen', "(who) wished for a book of humanity and love on (his) city." [Original Text in German: Ich habe mir ein Buch der Menschlichkeit und Liebe über meine Stadt gewünscht. (Siemes 2005)], Günter Grass reacted: "I was never good at writing love stories." [Original Text in German: In Liebesgeschichten war ich noch nie gut. (Siemes 2005)]. Grass spelled out with these words clearly, how important it was for him to represent the neglected class of the humanity through his penmanship.

When someone feeds a hungry person, one helps only one person. However, if a renowned author like Günter Grass addresses himself to a problem, he moves a whole society, to take up an issue. Grass defined an author as "book to book a sum total of his characters, thus also existent in the minor characters ..." [Original Text in German: Buch zu Buch die Summe seiner Figuren, also auch gegenwärtig in den Nebenfiguren,... (Jürgs 2002: 124)]. Grass placed book on a higher pedestal than the author. According to him, "a book must be more than the author. An Author is only a means to the objective." [Original Text in German: Ein Buch muss mehr sein als der Autor. Ein Autor ist nur ein Mittel zum Zweck. (Jürgs 2002: 101)]. During an author's reading in Berlin in 1992, Grass said: "Democratic old leftists, fossils like me, will however continue to speak up." (Original Quote in German: Demokratische Altlinke, Fossile wie ich, machen aber weiter den Mund auf.) This expression of Günter Grass explains, how important it was for the author to serve people with his views on different issues, social as well as political, and provide them an alternative to the standardization of opinions.

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