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## **Historical and Political Allusions in the Drama "Hamletmachine"**

**by Heiner Müller**

**Svetlana Georgievna Kolpakova<sup>1</sup>**

**Veronika Lubimovna Gataullina<sup>2</sup>**

**Ekaterina Vladimirovna Smyslova<sup>3</sup>**

### **Abstract**

In terms of postmodernism a classical plot becomes more active, mobile and begins to travel through the cultural discourses in different social and political channels, thereby indirectly achieving its full inner creative potential in the minds of "postmodern" readers. The paper focuses on Müller's "Hamletmachine" which uses the Shakespearean plot. The authors of the article explore the new features introduced by the writer into the classic plot by placing it in postmodern principles (game, changes of meanings, rhizome, blissful ignorance of consumer society) which are woven together in a syncretic way. Müller masterfully uses these devices to transmit the political ideas and describe the history of communism and the historical events.

The comparative method in combination with complex descriptive analysis of the text is chosen as the main methodology. The aim of the study is to find out what purposes and what political events Müller involves in the text of the drama.

**Keywords:** Heiner Müller, Hamletmachine, political allusions, historical allusions, Shakespeare's reception

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<sup>1</sup> Kazan Federal University, Lecturer, Ph.D., Department of Foreign Languages in the Field of International Relations, e-mail: [SGKolpakova@kpfu.ru](mailto:SGKolpakova@kpfu.ru)

<sup>2</sup> Kazan Federal University, Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages in the Field of International Relations, e-mail: [mega.sppa@mail.ru](mailto:mega.sppa@mail.ru)

<sup>3</sup> Kazan Federal University, Department of Foreign Languages in the Field of International Relations, e-mail: [mega.sppa@mail.ru](mailto:mega.sppa@mail.ru)

## **Introduction**

Müller referred to Shakespeare's heritage throughout his life. After translating and adapting the works by Shakespeare the writer commenced transforming "Shakespeare's material" into his own works. That is the way "Hamletmachine" was created in 1977.

According to the Müller, Shakespeare was synonymous with wars and revolutions. Shakespeare created such characters who since then no longer existed with the exception of the personalities of 1917: "Lenin was a Shakespearean character, Trotsky was a Shakespearean character, Stalin was a Shakespearean character" [quoted from 1, p. 165]. Müller perceived the end of the era of socialism as the end of the era of Shakespeare and time of bourgeois farce. A. Karschnia notes that for Müller Shakespeare had never been associated with humanism and realism. On the contrary, for the German writer Shakespeare's "great realism" is the obvious opposite of humanism, since it did not want to know anything about the bloody roots of history, seeing itself on the way to near social harmony [quoted from 1, p. 219].

## **Methods**

The study is interested in what way and what events of the political history of the world manifested in the drama "Hamletmachine". The main method of the research is a comparative method combined with a complex descriptive analysis of the text.

## **Results and Discussion**

Müller worked on nine pages of "Hamletmachine" after his first nine-month stay in the United States (1975/1976) and intensive work in the winter of 1976/1977 in Bulgaria. The play "Hamletmachine" was written immediately on completion of "Hamlet" translation. "For thirty years "Hamlet" had been my obsession, and as a result I wrote a short text, "Hamletmachine", which I tried to destroy "Hamlet" with [1, p. 218]. As J. Jourdeuil, a French playwright, director and translator, underlines nothing is left of Shakespeare's text in the drama "Hamletmachine", except for a few short quotations as if "Hamlet" was erased with Müller's text, as if "Hamlet" was replaced by it [1, p. 222].

This short drama affects a wide associative range of the recipient due to global intertextuality. On the ground of this text the topics of world madness, war, feminism, totalitarianism, environmental disasters, globalization, etc. may be discussed [2, 3]. However, Müller insisted on its political interpretation [4, 5].

The background to the creation of "Hamletmachine" is the historical events of Europe and the history of communism. In the early 1960s, Müller planned to write a play called "Hamlet in Budapest." In the manuscript the play was marked HiB (Hamlet in Budapest). According to J. Jourdeuil, the first scene of the drama was inspired by the funeral of the Stalinist politician Lazlo Rajk, held in Budapest on October 6, 1956, that is fifteen days before the uprising. The funeral procession was followed by the widow and the son, which reminded the author of Hamlet's father's funeral. Laertes's planned rebellion (in act IV of Shakespeare's "Hamlet") superimposed on the picture of the Budapest revolt.

Thus, the writer saw a historical drama with Shakespearean overtones, which in the 1960s Müller failed to realize due to the lack of artists' freedom in the German Democratic Republic. "Hamletmachine", written in 1977, was banned in the GDR and staged only 13 years later [6].

Five scenes of Müller's drama recall the five acts of Shakespeare's tragedy. However, all Shakespearean events introduced in the text are "turned inside out" and presented with Hamlet's opposite attitude towards it which is typical of postmodernism. The writer rejects the traditional plot. The development of the drama is mainly due to Hamlet's decision to restore justice. The first part of the drama "Family Album" begins with a negative representation of the hero: "I was Hamlet" [7], which in other words is: "I am not Hamlet." "Family album" can be divided into four scenes, which the hero narrates about.

The socio-political issues are addressed in the first part. There is an image of power embodied in the Royal family figures. Anchoring vocabulary (the ruins of Europe, the advisers, king Richard III, the princes' killer, the population, communist spring, the executioner, Denmark as a prison) attracts the attention to political issues. The vocabulary intensifying the atmosphere of horror is repeated.

In the four scenes of the first part of the drama, Müller's Hamlet performs actions sacrilegious for Shakespeare's Hamlet. In the first scene depicting the funeral, the widow and the murderer follow the coffin. In addition to Shakespeare's reception, this episode is an allusion to the historical events on the eve of the Hungarian uprising preceded by the above-mentioned funeral of the politician Laszlo Raik. Thus, the first part of the drama simultaneously introduces the prehistory of the uprising and chronologically corresponds to the historical events.

The narrator ("former" Hamlet) pries open the casket with his sword, dismembers the corpse and gives its flesh to the poor and the disabled. It can be interpreted as a return to the people what they had been taken away from by the authorities. The equation of power with people precedes a further personality split of Hamlet's character, on the one hand, and introduces the main idea that everyone, regardless of social status, is responsible for historical events, on the other hand. In the second scene, the hero communicates with his father's spirit. Hamlet contemptuously calls him "old deadbeat" and points to his own guilt: "Do you have no blood on your shoes?" [7]. This sentence means the blame of the bloody totalitarian regime or any power in general. In the third scene Hamlet offers Horatio to play Polonius, who "wants to sleep with his daughter" [7]. Then Horatio/Polonius leaves or dies as it might be supposed from the following drama remark: "Exit Polonius". In the last scene of the first part Hamlet rapes his mother, and his final scene phrase is suddenly addressed to Ophelia instead of his mother. He offers her to let him eat her heart, introducing this way the second part of the play "THE EUROPE OF WOMAN".

According to J. Jourdeuil, the author's "upside down" representation can be explained by the first version of the name of this part ("dream 1") existed in 1976-1977. Along with the oxymoronic nature of Hamlet's actions "duplication" by the hero, Müller's Hamlet's emotions are similar to Shakespeare's Hamlet's ones. He watches the immorality of the world with horror ("I laid on the ground and heard the world turning her rounds in step with the decay") [7]. A variation of Shakespeare's motif ("The time is out of joint") is the desire to stick "a piece of iron" in someone, "to latch onto it since the world is spinning". Hamlet's reflections on death are reduced to the wish to

end life in a pub:" LORD BREAK MY NECK WHEN I FALL FROM AN ALEHOUSE BENCH" [7] (capital letters by H. Müller).

In the second part of "THE EUROPE OF WOMAN", where "Europe" stands for the political and geographical extension of the problematics under consideration, Ophelia's motif is developed as a generalized victim symbol embodied in a female image. However, it is a victim of political repression as well. In this scene J. Jourdeuil finds an allusion to Rosa Luxemburg, Inge Müller, Ulrike Meinhof, i.e. an allusion to the woman, "the one the river didn't keep" (Rosa Luxemburg's body was dumped in The Landwehr Canal which is also an allusion to Shakespeare's Ophelia who drowned); an allusion to "The woman at the gallows" (according to the official version of the German authorities, Ulrike Meinhof, one of the leaders and theorists of "The Red Army Faction" (RAF), hanged herself in the cell); an allusion to "The woman with her head in the gas oven." (Inge Müller, the writer's wife, committed suicide by gas poisoning) [7]. Ophelia rejects the role of the woman enslaved and ruined by men: "Yesterday I stopped killing myself <...> I smash the instruments of my imprisonment <...> With my bloody hands I tear the photographs of the men <...> who used me <...> I set fire to my prison" [7]. That is her proclamation declaring the rejection of the old-world order of "fathers". In contrast to Hamlet, Ophelia firmly states her Self in the first words: "I am Ophelia." She refuses life which is similar to a mechanism. Ophelia's image becomes a symbol of an active protest against violence and is opposed to Hamlet's one.

"SCHERZO" is set in a cemetery presented as the University of the dead (a possible allusion to the University of Wittenberg). The dead philosophers throw their books at Hamlet (devaluation of morality and the collected wisdom of books). Hamlet refuses to be a man, escapes his role, functions and responsibility for the image of the woman unable to produce offspring as his goal is "a world without mothers" to end violence with people's extinction.

Hamlet Actor narrates the fourth part of the drama "PEST IN BUDA BATTLE FOR GREENLAND" throughout. The first line introduces an allusion to the revolution: "The oven smokes in peaceless October" (it was October when the uprising in Hungary broke out). This is followed by a verse, partly in English, in which Doctor Zhivago and the rebellion are mentioned. So, it brings in the main theme of the fourth part which is the revolution in general, and given the historical allusion, the uprising in Hungary in 1956. The name of the drama part "Pest in Buda" drops an unambiguous hint about it as the two words combined is "Budapest". The narrator takes off mask and costume. He is not called Hamlet any more, he is Hamlet Actor (the narrator who plays Hamlet). These "theatrical" remarks with the change of masks, roles, images immerse the reader in postmodern game.

Hamlet Actor tells the reader about the monument ("It depicts a man who made history, a hundred times enlarged"), demolished "three years after the state funeral of the hated and worshipped one" [7]. The mention of the master's funeral again refers to the burial of Hamlet's father, on the one hand, and it is an allusion, referring to Stalin, who died in 1953, on the other hand. The Hungarian uprising took place just three years later, in 1956.

The razed monument, a symbol of unfulfilled hopes, lies on the ground. The reader guesses that this is a monument to Stalin, owing to the author's indication of time. The monument is demolished

three years after his burial, that is in 1956. "The uprising comes at an appropriate time after the collapse of the monument" the narrator says [7].

Hamlet Actor believes that if his drama is destined to happen, it will be during the uprising. Then he describes the uprising, which "starts as a stroll ", but bellicosity rapidly increases: The rebels storm the buildings, prisons, police stations, secret police. The government supporters get hung by their feet (the pictures of the disfigured bodies suspended by the rebels flew around the world). This passage of the drama is the most realistic, the language records the events dryly and briefly. There are no allegories, hyperboles, phantasmagoric images typical of the drama in the description of the uprising, since the real events are similar to a nightmare. After describing the rebels' actions, Hamlet Actor concludes that he is both a representative of the people and the government. The personality of the narrator-intellectual splits: "My place, if my drama would still take place, would be on both sides of the front, between the fronts, beyond them" [7].

But the rebellion comes to an end, Hamlet is safe and sound and reports that his drama has not taken place. Taking off and putting on masks, participating and not participating in the drama in the background and in local political events recalls the idea that politics is a stage and all the politicians are merely players, correspondingly [4, 9]. Thus, all this flirting with theatrical paraphernalia means active participation in political life.

After the uprising, dissolving into questionable consumer comfort and well-being, Hamlet Actor states that his drama has not taken place yet. According to J. Jourdeuil, this signifies the author's failure to write a "Shakespearean" drama, the climax of which should have been a description of the uprising. This part of the manuscript was marked by H. Müller as "end of title – end of dream".

After Hamlet Actor's personality split during the revolution and its development into relative integrity in the image of a primitive man despiritualized by consumer society, Hamlet's character rejects everything human in himself: "I don't want to eat to drink breathe love a woman a man a child an animal any more <...> I want to be a machine" [7]. In addition to physical senses rejection, Müller's Hamlet refuses thinking. Whereas Shakespeare's Hamlet considers reason to be one of the highest human values, Müller's Hamlet gets hurt by it: "My thoughts are lesions in my brain <...> no pain no thoughts" [7].

When Hamlet's character rejects human nature (feelings, thoughts) political ideologues of communism (Marx, Lenin and Mao) appear in the drama. They are presented in the image of naked women whose busts Hamlet Actor smashes with the axe at the end of the fourth part of the drama. Thus, Müller's Hamlet's deed protests against totalitarianism. However, taking into consideration that it is manifested in the female image the protagonist's action can be treated as an act of violence as well.

The theme of Greenland, announced in the title of the fourth part, is not further manifested. Apparently, the real political situation, including Greenland's one, triggered the playwright's associative connection with the Hungarian uprising, political conflicts that developed after World War II. In respect of Greenland, it is known that the U.A. Air Force has been using bases in the territory of Greenland since 1941, and the United States has been trying to buy Greenland from Denmark for the sake of extremely favorable strategic location of these territories since 1946.

Therefore, the conflicts between the Greenlanders and Denmark regularly had arisen, which forced the Greenlanders (5 years after the writing of the drama) to vote in favour of the EU exit. It happened in 1985.

In the second half of the 1970s, one of the main problems of the political life of Germany was the threat of terrorism. Despite the fact that in 1976-77 the activists of the first generation of the RAF died (the allusions to them are in the drama), the year of 1977 was the apogee in the activities of the terrorist organization followers. The so-called "German autumn" shocked the German society [10].

The final fifth part represents another monologue by Ophelia. In the last metaphorical scene Ophelia, now naming herself ELEKTRA, realizes what Hamlet strove to perform but failed. She stops the course of history, taking back the world she gave birth to ceasing the chain of violence: " I reject all of the semen that I received. I turn the milk of my breasts into deadly poison. I take back the world that I bore. I suffocate the world that I bore between my thighs. I bury it in my shame." [7].

### **Summary**

Müller sees Hamlet as a criminal who failed to resolve world disagreements and prevent the escalation of violence and stop the endless war. Hamlet and Ophelia confront the old world order of "fathers". For both, it is a symbol of enduring violence. However, the main Shakespearean images are radically reconsidered in the drama "Hamletmachine". Shakespeare's Hamlet is reinterpreted as a character who experiences torments in connection with the criminal violence perpetrated by the authorities but does not wish to use vicious methods for the sake of justice. Although he is not capable of implementing his intentions of ending world violence by humans ceasing. Müller shows that the son who, despite his spiritual and mental doubts, in essence does not differ from the generation of fathers, that is, he continues the vicious practice of violence, even reasoning from Hamlet's desire to stop the depravity of the world. Meanwhile, Shakespeare's Ophelia's image of the obedient and dependent daughter evolves in Müller's play into a generalized symbol of victim, on the one hand. On the other hand, this victim gets rid of bondages and vigorously realizes what Hamlet was proved to be incapable of, that is absorbing and destroying the world, full of violence.

### **Conclusions**

Müller's play "Hamletmachine" declares that in the modern world it is impossible to remain innocent, everyone is a participant in what is happening. In this drama, Müller refers to the history of communism, the political events of 1956 in Hungary and at the same time draws a parallel to the real political problem of Greenland and Germany. Thus, the problematics of the play extends from Europe to the whole world.

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