The Memory about the Jewish Name in Thomas Hürlimanns Trilogy

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Abstract. As Assmann’s theory proves, the Literature plays an important role for the collective memories. It changes the discourse structure of society, by means of letting marginal, repressed or forgotten voice be read, heard and then finally have the chance to be reflected. This article aims to analyze the “family trilogy” of Hürlimann, one of the most significant Swiss authors, in order to figure out the collective and literary memories associated with Jews in Switzerland and its impact on the construction of the their identity.

The Role of “Name” in Literary Works

What in reality a taboo or repressed is, that can oft be described in literature. As one of the important median of collective memories, literature breaks boundary between fiction and history, furthermore it changes the discourse structure of society, by means of letting marginal, repressed or forgotten voice be read, heard and then finally have the chance to be reflected. In Thomas Hürlimann’s trilogy, there are many special realms bearing such intensive communicative and cultural collective memories that are associated with Jews, the Jewish family Name for example. Thomas Hürlimann is one of the most famous novelists in Switzerland and was awarded many Prizes, including Thomas Mann Prize, Adenauer Prize, the Literature Prize of Bayer’s Academic and so on. As his magnum opus, the autobiographical family trilogy, “Der große Kater”, “Fräulein Stark” and “Vierzig Rosen”, describes the rise-and-fall history of Swiss Jewish family “Katz” in nearly hundred years. He names fast all his main roles by “Katz” in trilogy, which makes it be a realm of cultural & communicative memory in his narrative. For there is no name in art which carries no meaning, so believed Tynjanow, a researcher of the Russian literary history. Werner Betz holds the same view in his book “Zur Namenphysiognomik”: the author is not likely to rely entirely on random, when they choose a name for their protagonist. The association between names and roles in literature becomes a common theme in academic research [1]. In other words, the name of Hürlimanns Protagonists “Katz” contains a wealth of background information, and it reflects even directly the life circumstance, misfortune and fates of its name-bearers.

“Katz” as Jewish Surname in the Historical Memory

Ashkenazi is the biggest Jewish group. It owned 92% of all Jews before the Second World War. Both in the Jewish community in Palestine and in Israel, this group has been occupying the absolute dominate position in the political, economic and cultural field since the 19th century. For this reason, some scholars call Israel the “Ashkenazi hegemonic ethnic state” [2]. That is the group “Katz” belongs to. “Katz” is one of the most common and oldest surnames of Ashkenazi, and at first has been found on a tombstone of the Prague cemetery, also on an Israeli grave in Frankfurt. In addition, Thomas Hürlimann has noted his own experience in the trace of family past in Galicia, where his Jewish ancestors, both in reality and trilogy, had lived before their exiles. At the border of Poland and Ukraine, he kept following narrative of grandmother in the memory and finally came to a Jewish cemetery in Przemsyl: “through a large soldier cemetery and then went down very far, looking for a long time, we were arriving finally at Jewish cemetery in the wild forest. I stepped forward into the wet ferns and stood in front of one tombstone: On that serious eroded and weathered stone was an impressively engraved ‘Katz’, that is the name that I gave my ancestors in
my novel” [3]. For the old surname “Katz”, there are two main claims in the study of the origin and meaning of Jewish names: It could be an abbreviation form of the Hebrew “Kohen Zedek”, meaning “priest of justice” [4]. The other argues that it may also refer to epithet of the supposed descendants of Aaron in the Jewish Bible [5]. The reason, why this typical Ashkenazi surname was completely replaced by German “Katz”, is related to the living conditions and historical background of Germany Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the ancient and biblical times, the Jewish people did not have a permanent family name that could be inherited. Even to 10th and 11th century, the surnames were only available to prestigious people, such as university scholars, poets and other celebrities with honor and privilege. This situation was unable to accommodate the age after industrial revolution anymore, as the flourish and sustainable development of the trade depended on the individual credit system. For the sake of better management in commercial trade and financial order, the Austrian King Joseph II issued in 1787 “Das Patent über die Judennamen”. This ordinance stipulates that the Jews must have a German surname, when they want to be granted the civil rights of education, art, business, military and other rights the native residents have [6].

The name-changing of the European Jews, to a certain extent, reflect the survival ethical dilemma of the homeless Jews in that era. On the one hand, in order to integrate into the host country and obtain the same rights as the citizens of the country, they were left no other option but to change their names; On the other hand, they are psychologically unable to succumb to this ordinance, for the abandonment of the original Hebrew name also means a break or even betray of their whole past and identity. Beyond that, although it was legally allowed for Jews to “choose” an appropriate surname, but in fact they did rarely be able to make the final decision, especially in Austria. In not rare occasions, they had to accept the names that were designated by authorities on the contrary. Many of these surnames are insulted, malicious or offensive. In order to avoid being named like that and then have an appropriate option, the Jews must bribe the responsible official with lots of money [7]. The Jews, who are proficient in religious canon preferred to take the first letter(s) of Hebrew words or sentence, so that it can constitute a very obscure acronym. The Hebrew name Kohen Zedek / Kohen Tzadok turns in this way into a German name “Katz” for example.

“Katz” and Its Implication in the Communicative Memory

This family name witnessed the renaming, compromise and the protracted struggle of European Jews and their forced assimilation to the host country in more than half a century. This fact implicates their desire for keeping faith and being loyal to convictions, as well as the Jewish identity. But meanwhile, the adherence to the traditional beliefs of local residents was the only choice left for the people in the homeless state. It seemed like either a voluntary or a forced action of Jews, who try to integrate into the cultural context of the residence country. They have been looking for a strategy that could help balance between their faithfulness and assimilation. But from the perspective of Christen, the original meaning of “Katz” mattered already a lot. In Hürlimann’s “Fräulein Stark”, the 13-years-old protagonist spent the summer vacation with his uncle, the chef curator of the St. Gallen library in Switzerland. Here the narrator “I” was assigned a task to put each visitor an appropriate cover over the shoe at the library portal. Driven by women’s fragrance, the narrator took a hand mirror for the purpose of peeking up the woman skirt. After being denounced, Miss Stark, the assistant of the uncle, criticized him for being “impure” and accused him to the curator, who was a “Katz” as well: “Your nephew is a little Katz; we must beware of him” [8]. The name-bearers of “Katz” refer to the descendants of “Aaron”. According to the Hebrew Bible, Aaron was a chosen spokesperson and assistant of Moses, who finally betrayed Moses however. So that Aaron was not allowed by God to enter the holy land of Canaan. For the Catholic Swiss, the sinful behavior and character of Aaron was similar to that of Jews both in nowadays and in history, and the latter deserved severe punishment too. This leads to the fact that the people always mocked, stayed vigilant, alienated or disdainful in front of the “Katz” and the Jewish people it represented. It is worth mentioning as well that in the novel Miss Stark has no first name, and this German name means “the one who is strong, intense, prominent and hard to defeat” in English. In short, she is not just on behalf of herself, but also the concrete incarnation of the Swiss ordinary people. And her
attitude towards the Jews served to portray or depict that of others in the surroundings. Despite that the target of her criticism was the individual narrator, but she directly called him the family name instead of first name. In this way, she combined the individual “impure” upon the collective Jews, which represented the anti-Semitism ideology in Switzerland in the post-war modern society. This ideology with ingrained prejudice accompanied the whole history of “Katz” family and impacted to a great extent their identity construction.

It can either be concluded that in their mind, the “Katz” and its represented Jews are born with blasphemy, indulgence and other sins, which rooted so deep in the blood that one must keep particularly vigilant and wary all the times. Facing the deliberate offense, the uncle didn’t even have the courage of seeing towards Miss Stark, he just “looked at the ceiling and then said: The name was simply inherited from his father” [9]. Although these words showed to some extent his opposite attitude to her prejudice, but at the same time, his opposition was also not a tough defend of the innocence of Katz family. The implication of these responses sounded more like an emphasis that the protagonist has nothing to do with what his father and ancestors had done. In other words, the curator didn’t completely deny what Miss Stark had said. Furthermore, in “Vierzig Rosen”, he wanted himself also no relationship with the name “Katz”: Once the Louise blurted out “Dr. Katz”, then his eyes behind of the thick glasses would become very sharp and said refused: “Louise, try to remember, I hope others call me priest, p-r-i-e-s-t” [10]. Besides that, he used usually “you Jews” to address them in the conversation with his family members. This action aimed to make clear that he was not similar as them and didn’t belong to Jews. In one word, the Jews were “Others” for him. It is to say, even the Jews hated to be treated as Jews, which is also applicable to Marie’s father in “Fräulein Stark”.

Beside of “Others”, the meaning of “Katz” is also implicated and reflected in the following scenario. One letter of Marie’s brother in “Vierzig Rosen” tells the story of “Herero”. “At each table in monastery sit eight boarders, seven of them have enough food, whereas the left one must walk away without eating anything. We call him “Herero”. He was a member of the African tribe and has been starved in Namibia by Germans. This is “Herero” at our table. “He has often to suffer the pain of hunger, endure and deal with the trial that Jesus Christ gave us ...” [11] With regards of the citation, the brother seemed more like a member of the majority and he described just his life and observations at the monastery. But at the end of this letter he wrote: “He has often to suffer the pain of hunger, endure and deal with the trial that Jesus Christ gave us ...” This “us” raised suspicions that the brother was not only sympathetic to the suffering of “Herero”, but even perhaps had a similar experience with him. When he went to visit Marie, the latter smiled and said that she definitely would not turn to be “Herero”. However, the brother lacked of any impression about this name and appeared to be “embarrassed”, after Marie mentioned the letters he wrote. His reaction was not commensurate with the cognitive logic of emotion. “Embarrassed” means “in a dilemma, without knowing what to do; uncertain and have a feeling of awkwardness”. It could not simply be caused by just forgetting one acquaintance in front of Marie, on the contrary, it is more in line with mentality of facing a trauma which was afraid to be touched or recalled again. Thus, the story of “Herero” was more likely the memory of the brother “Katz”, and the table, where he sat, was “Katzentisch” indeed. The use of “Katzentisch” could be traced back to the “Ketzertisch” of monasteries in the 17th century. At the very beginning, “Katzentisch” was a slightly wicked appellation of “the floor” and specifically used to describe the place, where the isolated, marginalized and unaccepted one had to stay at the meal time. The letter of Marie’s brothers reflected the widespread and everlasting ideology of antimerism in Switzerland. In addition, the German term “am Katzentisch sitzen / essen” means originally “sitting / eating at a small table that away from the ordinary seat” in English. Today it refers the kind of tables that are normally reserved for children or the driver, who either need rely on the guardian to survive, or on the employer to be paid. Both of them have neither opportunity nor right to speak out their own opinions on a formal occasion. Groups at “Katzentisch”, such as children, drivers or poorly paid employees, belong to vulnerable groups in the social discourse context, who have always been treated as parasites or outsiders. Because of lacking self-expression, their voice and rights fall often
easily into the state of being forgotten and play therefore an insignificant or marginal Role invariably.

“Katz” as Symbol of Resistance

In Hürlimann’s trilogy, “Katz” symbolizes also Jewish resistance and objection to discrimination. The German word “Katz” means “cat” in English. On the dome of St. Gallen library, where the author in reality, also the protagonist of the novel “Fräulein Stark”, spent his summer holiday, there is a cat next to Judah in the picture. According to the Hebrew Bible Genesis, there is no cat among the animals that are finally brought to Noah’s ark”. And as mentioned above, “Katzentisch” is derived from the “Ketzertisch”, so it seems that “cat” is close associated with “Ketzer”, i.e. “Others”, “Outsiders” and “heretics”. Moreover, in the place where Hürlimann had rented, it was totally forbidden to raise pets, the landlord kept even a dog to drive stray animals or pets away that might appear in the neighborhood. But there was still a cat running leisurely towards him. The fearlessness and free image the cat represents gave the author a great creative inspiration for writing. In the novel “Der große Kater”, the writer has described the life of protagonist at monastery, where “Katzwesen” (“the nature of cat”) functioned as the opposite of “Vasewesen” (“the demanded image for assimilation”). Both in the context of reality and that of fiction, the “Katz” is supposed not only to be an incarnation of the “Outsiders and Others” referring to the Noah’s ark, but also to be an embodiment for undomesticated, rebellious, energetic state of mind in repressing and dull atmosphere [12]. Besides the family trilogy, the novel “Der Gartenhaus” portrays as well a significant image of cat that determines the developing direction of the story. In many interviews, Hürlimann has often talked about the association of his cat in reality with that in the novel [13], which shows the author’s love for cat and the meaning it implicates and reflects: the resistance and revolt against hegemonies and discrimination.

Summary

The family “Katz” in Hürlimann’s novels could be seen as the panorama of the fate and memory of Jews in the history. “Katz” belongs to the oldest family names of Jewry and represents the predicament of this nation which are divorced from the mainstream of society and considered as the outsider by other members. On the one hand, it implies the Jewish ancient historical traditions and cultural memories, also the homeless destiny of the entire nation ever since the fall of Jerusalem. Lack of chance for self-expression, it is easy for them to fall into a state of oblivion and edge role. Therefore, they are in constant movement and forth, always “on the road”. Despite that this Jewish surname stands for innately groups with “Original Sin” as before in the Catholic Swiss, and “am Katzentisch sitzen / essen” are still used to characterize the “marginality, not accepted subjects”, yet “Katz” carries the meaning of resistance and revolt against hegemonies and discrimination in itself on the other hand.

References


