

Elias Canetti and the Enigma of Jewish Identity

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[Elias Canetti was born into a Sephardic Jewish family on 25th of July 1905 in Ruschuk, a small port on the river of Danube, Bulgaria. Among his main works are *Die Blendung, Masse und Macht, Die gerettete Zunge, Die Fackel im Ohr, Das Augenspiel*. He received the Nobel Prize in 1981 for his outstanding contribution to literature in general and to German Literature in particular. Contemporary research on the life and works of Elias Canetti chiefly relate to the engagement with cultural dialogue, cultural anthropology, literary intertextuality and literature – in – flux.]

The publication of the novel 'Die Blendung' might well have appreciably spurred the fame and recognition of Elias Canetti as a celebrity. The subtle and powerful narrative of the dissociation of a personality, namely Prof. Kien, constitutes the striking core of the novel. Scholars have referred to the explicit autobiographical resemblance of this narrative, which otherwise would also evoke the reader's thoughtful inclination to ponder upon the immensely baffling moment of self-understanding almost at the verge of derangement. Prof. Kien's library, consumed by flames, obliquely symbolizes the state of self-effacement, in which context the 'identity' of Kien or that of the author seems to be thrown into disarray. Incontrovertibly, this enfeebling of 'identity', the recurrent restorative flicker of the probability of retaining an 'identity' and the postulation of the conceivable 'identity' permeate the entire gamut of the texts and thoughts of Elias Canetti.

Canetti's distressing travails with the identity crisis can be indubitably traced back to his early childhood, when he was unconsciously endeavoring to forge his identity amid the multitude of his linguistic lineages. The beginning years of his life seem to be prominently marked by proliferation of transitory and contending identities, thus thwarting a monolithic model of identity. Born as a Spanish-speaking Jew in 1905 in Bulgaria, he migrated to England with his parents in 1911. From 1913 onwards he grew up under the circumspect protection of his mother first in Vienna, then in Zurich. Soon Canetti had learnt to pull off eloquently in five languages and hereon would prefer, at times, to refer to his childhood as no less than a

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'miracle'. It may, hence, not be stunning indeed that Canetti has attempted to portray the theme of identity from diverse perspectives in his literary works.

Of several aspects of the question of identity surfacing below Canetti's literary and critical outpourings, the one relating to his Jewish identity shrouds layers of realities at work behind his literary commitment and his, at times, dissenting vein. The consciousness entrapped in enduring rupture between a sense of belonging to the world and being a Jew overshadowed Canetti's self-reflection. The nonplussed state of mind between the nondescript identity of a Jew on the one hand and conceiving a probable distance from Russians, Germans or even from Chinese on the other hand is symptomatic of Canetti's heightened and disconnected discernment of the self. He overtly put forward this problematic: "Should I distance myself from the Russian, because there are Jews, from the Chinese, because they are far off, from the German, because they are obsessed by the devil? Can I not further on belong to all of them, as till now, and still be a Jew?"(1)

This statement has a familiar ring to the discussion about the Jewish identity in the early decades of the 20th century in Germany. Martin Buber commanded a pioneering voice in this discussion and both the 'Buber Circle' and the magazine 'Der Jude', edited by Buber, rhetorically governed this debate. Ludwig Strauss, Max Brod, Alfred Wolfenstein, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Magarete Susman were some among prominent thinkers ardently participating in this debate about the loss of Jewish original land and the utopian vision of a future Jewish community and homeland.

Buber and Bloch represent two poles of this debate, former advocating a theological and the later holding to an intellectual utopia. Buber laid emphasis on preserving an image of society, which is summoned by the future coming of Messiah. In his book 'I and Thou' published in 1923, Buber expressed the belief of human encounter with God as a distinct being. Bloch, on the other hand, sought to elucidate a process of 'inward turn' (Verinnerlichung) of the Jewish folk since the uprooting and dispersion of Jews in different corners of the world. Bloch stresses this inwardness of the Jewish folk: "For the Jews are still not tired. They will not stop, they are like cells of the heart and do not let themselves relax."(2)

Being a Jew, Canetti albeit was commiserated with the pain-racked homelessness and the grouse of Jewish fraternity. Articulating the tribulation of Jews and their perseverance to disseminate plural cultural values across the globe, Canetti writes: "No folk is more difficult to understand than the Jews. They are spread over the entire inhabited earth, their ancestral land was lost for them. Their ability to adjust is known and infamous, in fact the reason of their adjustment is enormously variable. There were among them Spanish, Indians and Chinese. They carry languages and cultures from one country to another with themselves and protect it more tenaciously than possession."(3)

Insofar Canetti rues the fate of the Jewish folk, he neither upholds a Zionist vision nor an intellectual utopia. To him, the Jewish identity embodies less a construct weighed with inexorable intellectual inwardness, as suggested by Ernst Bloch, and more the earnestness of the Jews to accommodate themselves in different countries and cultural zones. The understanding of the process of the dispersal of the Jewish community, for him, represents the understanding of the process of Jewish diaspora. The particularity of Jewish diaspora relates to the ceaseless phenomenon of exile and emigration of Jewish community. This exigency of the existence, distinct and unusual though, of the Jews was put into words by Rudolf Kayser : "So this is the mission of the Jews to keep themselves nationless, making the earth into the home of humans"(4)

Canetti contextually hints at, not incidentally rather legitimizing, a conviction about a historic-cultural reality, obscurity and the uncertainty of the identity of Jewish community. Despite prolonged wandering, the Jews have neither found a nation of their own nor a definite distinction in terms of an individual language. They have, as it were an existential quandary, perpetuated their alliance with a transnational miscellany of languages. Canetti underlines:...but among the old folks they are the only one, which has been wandering for quite so long. They were given the most enough time to disappear without trace; but still today they are more than ever before. A territorial or linguistic unity was not available among them till few years back. Most of them did no more understand Hebrew, they spoke in hundred tongues."(5)

Canetti resorted to a position contrary to that of Kayser, in that he didn't subscribe to viewpoint proposing and vindicating the persuasion of a promised Jewish homeland. The art and artistic praxis, in course of time, had been conceived as one of the alternative correlates of Jewish loss of the homeland. (6) Canetti's anticipation and postulation of such a homeland, sustained by aesthetic impulse, is closely linked with the creative potential of the language. Presumably in a conscious tenor he wrote: "Too many streets in the language, all already paved." (7) Canetti therefore, calls upon the writer to explore one's own language. The awareness of the mediation of a utopian feeling of home through the language, which at times may explain the plural situation of the self (as in the case of Canetti), became the cornerstone of the plausible affinity between language and identity for Canetti.

Canetti's experience of exile sets the backdrop of his theoretical claim. He lived through a phase of 'attack of words' (Wortanfaelle) in Exile. The words were left back as the only means, in which Canetti could preserve his belongingness to an origin, screening off his torturous suffering to exist as non-entity (Niemand) in alien culture. The instance of his helplessness to replace German through a foreign language exemplifies his deep, unruffled tie with German language. The instinct of abiding 'rootedness' in a language is brought forth in the following words of Canetti: "The strange power and energy of the words one feels there the strongest, where one is forced to put the others at its place."(8) In exile, Canetti

maintained an impassioned proximity to German language and continued writing German, whereby he also endeavored proximity to foster an identity for himself. He wrote: "Then I have continued writing further German in England was as obvious as breathing and going. I could have not done the other way, another possibility was never considered."(9)

Despite and apart from the cognition of the Jewish diaspora, Canetti was instinctually driven to German language. This, probably, was indicative of a rather bewildering relationship. This relationship, the 'double-walking' (Doppelgaengertum) showed itself in a specific loss of peace and place, in the dialectic of the restlessness and the relative stability or belongingness of a heterolingual Jewish author. Had the Germans been inspired by the world of music, categories of becoming and the time, so were the Jews too. In view of this proximity, German language and the Jewish literature are, seemingly juxtaposed. Conceding, may be, to this historical, cultural conjunction, Canetti put across his stance: "Amongst the west-European languages the German appears to act differently. In it, it preserves itself, it remains alive, in the Romanian languages it dissolves traceless. Here, it moves itself in a sovereign way."(10) In language, particularly in German, Canetti escaped the ennui of exile.

NOTES

See, "Soll ich mich den Russen verschliessen , weil es Juden gibt, den Chinesen, weil sie ferne, - den deutschen – weil sie vom Teufel besessen sind? Kann ich nicht weiterhin allen gehoeren, wie bisher, und doch Jude sein?" Elias Canetti : *Die Provinz des Menschen. Aufzeichnungen. 1942-1972.* Fischer Taschenbuch vlg. Dez. 1986. S.61

See, "Denn immer noch sind die Juden nicht muede. Sie werden nicht aussetzen, sie sind wie Herzzellen und lassen sich nicht entspannen." Horch, Hans Otto : Expressionismus und Judentum : Zu einer Debatte in Martin Bubers Zeitschrift "Der Jude". In: Anz, Thomas/ Stark, Michael (hrsg.) : *Die Modernitaet des Expressionismus.* J.B. Metzler vlg. Stuttgart 1994. S.124

See, "Kein Volk ist schwieriger zu begreifen als die Juden. Sie sind ueber die ganz bewohnte Erde verbreitet, ihr Stammland war ihnen verloren. Ihre Faehigkeit zur Anpassung ist beruehmt und beruechtigt, doch der Grund ihrer Anpassung ist ungeheuer variable. Es gab unter ihnen Spanier, Inder und Chinesen. Sie tragen Sprachen und Kulturen von einem Land ins andere mit sich und hueten sie zaehrer als Besitz." Canetti, Elias: *Masse und Macht.* Classen vlg. Hamburg 1973. S.201

See, "Das also ist die Mission der Juden : selbst staatenlos die Erde zur Menschenheimat zu machen." Horch, Hans Otto : Op.cit. S.129

See, ".....Aber sie sind von den alten Voelkern das Einzige, das so lange schon wandert. Es war ihnen am meist Zeit gegeben spurlos zu verschwinden; und doch sind sie heute mehr da als je. Eine territoriale oder sprachliche Einheit gab es unter ihnen bis vor wenigen Jahren nicht. Die meisten verstanden Hebraeisch nicht mehr, sie sprachen in hundert Zungen." Canetti, Elias : *Masse und Macht.* Op.cit. S.202

Horch, Hans Otto : Op.cit. S.132

See, "Zuviel Strassen in der Sprache, alles vorgebahnt." Canetti, Elias: *Die Provinz des Menschen*. Op. Cit. S.196

See, "Die eigentuemliche Kraft und Energie und Worten spuert man dort am staerksten wo man gezwungen ist, andere an ihre Stelle zu setzen." Canetti, Elias: Wortanfalle. In: *Das Gewissen der Worte*. Essays. Hanser vlg. Munchen. O.J. S.159

See, "Denn dass ich in England weiter Deutsch geschrieben habe, war so selbsverstaendlich wie Atmen und Gehen. Ich haette nicht anders koennen, eine andere Moeglichkeit wurde nie erwogen." Ibid.

See, "Unter den westeuropaeischen Sprachen scheint sich die Deutsche anders zu verhalten. In ihr bewahrt es sich selbst, es bleibt lebendig, in die romanischen Sprachen eher spurlos aufgeloeest. Hier bewegt es sich zu souveraen..." Horch, Hans Otto : Op.Cit. S. 133