

# Lacan's Mirror and the Mirror Metaphor in Herta Müller's Novel *One-Legged Traveler*

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**Abstract.** Mirrors are often used as metaphors for identity confirmation in literary works. Identity issues are more classic motifs in immigrant novels. As the German immigrant writer Herta Müller, who won the Nobel Prize 2009, in her immigration novel *One-legged Traveler*, she used the mirror motif to metaphorize the heroine's self-identity in the life of immigrants after her immigration - It is not a journey of love-seeking on the plot, or a journey of immigration, but a journey of searching for self-identity. Mirroring, as the way she confirms herself, carries the metaphorical role of the self-recognition in the new country, and the tools of the self-identification. How to treat mirroring as a metaphor for identity? Lacan gave rationality to this metaphor mechanism by proposing "mirror theory" as early as 1936. It is also the basis for understanding Lacan's subject philosophy. Mirrors have become self-identifying natural symbols since Lacan. The encounter between psychoanalysis and literature, Lacan's mirror theory and the intertextuality of mirror motifs in literature can be confirmed and deepened in the interpretation of the mirror motif of Müller's *One-legged Traveler*.

## Introduction

When Herta Müller received the 2009 Nobel Prize award for her literary creation, the awarding words said: "Herta Müller has always been concerned with the small groups of marginalized groups, focusing on the fateful people who can't get rid of fate and their struggles." In these little people, the presentation and portrayal of the image of immigrants is inevitably pushed to the center of her novel stage - as a self-evident reflection of Herta Müller's own immigration background. As a witness to immigrants, as a writer of immigration literature, how does her immigration story unfold? How do classic immigrant motifs, such as identity issues, suspended life, hometown, etc., branded Müller's own mark?

In Herta Müller's novel *The One-legged Traveler*, Müller uses her alienated language and metaphorical metaphors—metaphors start almost from the title, and "one-legged" traveller is "full limbs." "The heroine Irena - outlines the complete outline of her immigrant image. Irena immigrated from her home country to Berlin, opening a suspended life between departure and arrival. In this suspension she must find her identity in the new environment of this new country and achieve a status landing from "suspended" to "arrived". Like all immigrants, she bears the memories of her home country. She is carrying burden in this new environment. She loses everything. As the title reveals, she is like a one-legged traveler, in the gap between lost and self-reconstruction in time and space. In the interactions of others around her, she is trying to find and reconstruct their identity.

In the philosophical dimension, the questioning of self and identity has been in existence for a long time, and it can be traced back to Socrates's "to know yourself". The answers to the self are given in all fields. And Lacan's mirror theory of identity construction is one the most important voices. It illustrates the impossibility of people looking for themselves. The identity of the heroine Irena, is therefore doomed in its theoretical perspective. And the "mirror" motif appeared many times in the novel, which seems to coincide with Lacan's mirror theory discourse, resulting in a subtle intertextual effect between Lacan's mirror-theory and Herta Müller's novel. After taking over Lacan's "mirror", readers retreat from the heavy burden of immigration through the love cloak of the novel, and then

rediscover the novel from the philosophical dimension: How does Irena in the novel confirm her identity? Why is the mirror motif an important metaphor for the identification of Irena?

### **Lacan's Mirror Self: Self-Construction based on Self-virtual Image and Alienated Others**

Lacan's mirror theory holds that people get the foundation for self-recognition by getting their first understanding of themselves from the mirror during their childhood: "A child who is still in the infant stage, stepping on his arms, leaning on his mother's arms, However, he is excited to attribute the image in the mirror to himself." [1]The "self" cognition takes the first step from the image in the mirror and is the starting point for self-identity. Lacan's mirror stage is not only the natural development stage of infants and young children's experience, but also a decisive moment of time dialectics, precedence and retrospective intertwining in the development of the subject. Therefore, on the second level, the mirror stage is not an unreturnable stage of infants and toddlers. "This development has been experienced as dialectic of time. It has decisively projected the formation of the individual into history: the mirror stage is a play, and its internal pressure is rapidly rushing from the insufficiency to the anticipation. In the subject of the temptation of spatial identity, the play produced a variety of fantasies from the broken image of the body to what I call the form of surgical plasticity of the body's integrity—until the armor of the alienated identity was finally worn. The rigid structure identifies the spiritual development of the subject." [2]The baby's confirmation based on the image in the mirror establishes the initial confirmation of the self, and the subsequent identity construction is based on this alienating process, which is accompanied by simultaneous occurrence. The establishment of the subject depends on the alienation of the self. The construction of the self is inseparable from the self and the counterpart of the self-the other, and the "other" is originally from the mirror of the self in the mirror. Achieved with the identity of this image. In the process of growth and self-development, people use the "other" as the mirror to obtain the "fuzzy" self-image confirmation in the other's realm, and continue to realize the "Gestalt" in the imaginary field. And in this way gain a clearer understanding of the so-called self.

"Self" makes you have to become what you should be in your imagination, even though this structure is a paradoxical existence or a process of creation: we must all find ourselves and become ourselves. The truth is that we cannot be the kind of people we are supposed to be.[3] Because Lacan believes that the construction of "self" is a formal freeze. From the mirror, the young child has acquired an unprecedented level of integrity, which has previously integrated the fragmentation perception of his body into a complete image. Slavoj Žižek said: "Only the other provides them with a holistic image, and the self can achieve self-identification; identity and alienation are therefore strictly closely related." [4]Lacan follows Freud's "unconscious imagery" (Imago to describe such a mirror self, and the person's life is to continue to get self-image identity, from the original mirror, to the other as a mirror, with more complex social relations as a mirror, get self-image recognition and Confirm that in this continuous process, the "self" is constructed and constantly changing. The "mirror" of this "pseudo-self" - whether it is the mirror of a young child or the mirror of the symbol of the other in the course of life - is the basis of identity, and this image of self-identification forces people to conform to it. Behavior and function. But by mirroring the self-image confirmation, it is indirect and unreliable - mirroring itself is nothing but a virtual image. The search for "self" driven by self-cognition leads to such an illusion, which is a kind of alienation of the subject. The tragedy that we can't break through is that we will be deceived by this virtual image and alienation for the rest of our lives, and we will never end to the true self. So Lacan said: "This is why the human self can never be attributed to the identity of his life, unless it is the limit that even the greatest genius never approached; and this explains why in the frustrating breakdown of the reversal experienced by inferiority, the ego fundamentally caused the fatal negation of freezing it into its form." [5]

It is not difficult to see from Lacan's mirror theory that he represents a very pessimistic negative view of self-cognition. He said a regrettable assertion that the self can never reach the true self identity. Self is a false illusion from the beginning of cognition. This fundamentally negates the possibility that we can get a real understanding. In Lacan's view, from the deterministic nature of Descartes's "I think, therefore I am." to the "absolute spirit" in Hegel's philosophy, it is actually a

kind of self-awareness built in illusions. Then Lacan concluded that "due to this madness from paranoia, people cannot directly grasp the truth. People only hope that the truth can be approached in the interaction between the system and the system, the illusion and the illusion!" [6] The death penalty of the self has been pronounced in Lacan's theory.

In Herta Müller's novel *One-legged Traveler*, the heroine of the immigration identity portrayed by the author has gone through the same self-seeking process, experienced and re-enacted in the meaning Lacan's theory in the new environment. In the process of mirroring self-construction, it is more noteworthy that the motif of mirroring has appeared many times in the novel, and it exists as a metaphor to echo it. At the same time, the other as the symbol of a mirror has also appeared on the scene. "The tragedy of the identity of the ending heroine concealed also coincides with Lacan's mirror self-theory - a tragedy that cannot be avoided based on the self-construction of the other and alienation.

## **Mirror in *One-Legged Traveler* as a Metaphor for Identity Confirmation**

### **A. Self-imaging in Photos - As a Self-Identifying Metaphor**

After leaving her home country, Irena went to the photo gallery to take a photo for her passport. The novel described in detail how the photographer communicated with her and directed her to take a picture with her eyes unclosed. Irena's sorrow was written on her face, and the photographer asked her for reasons. The photographer thinks that Elena is wearing makeup because of hoping to make a beautiful photo, but she was immediately denied by Irena, she said that she "had wanted to be beautiful", "has always been like that". These words "before" and "commonly" all point to a concept of "habits", which is eager to come out between the lines. Although the word "habit" has never appeared in the text, the novel constantly implies the presence of "habits" and her "past experience".

After arriving in Germany, Irena also described her sleeping habits of retaining her country, and so she fell down from the new bed. Habit is a kind of inertia memory and behavior formed in the long-term inherent state of life. At this moment, Irena is photographed for the passport, indicating that she left, the spatial dimension of leaving is her home country, and the self-identity dimension of the leaving is these habits. The photographer misunderstood her makeup as an emphasis on the photo, and Irena's explanation clearly confirmed the presence of her habits in the home country. However, at the moment of separation, the farewell to the habit is officially about to begin. And she seems to be psychologically adapting and preparing for such a farewell, and this pain is naturally reflected in the embarrassing state of taking pictures. She looked at the photo and looked at the self-evidence of her own image. "I first saw an acquaintance, I felt like I was similar, I looked more carefully, an acquaintance, but not quite the same as herself. A little similar, with Irena. It is a bit similar, from the eyes, mouth, and between the nose and the mouth, it is a stranger. A stranger slipped into the face of Irena. The strange face on Irena's face belongs to another Irena." [7] (P116) she, from familiarity to strangeness, has changed in a few seconds of watching. From this moment on, Self-identification and identification have begun to slowly blur with the upcoming separation, which is the beginning of the intrinsic identity disintegration and the beginning of a new self-identification identity reconstruction. The mirror image here, as a kind of self-confirmation, from clear and unambiguous to vague and strange, metaphorizes the identity of the crisis with the arrival of the separation, implying the end of an existing identity, and the arrival of the identity suspension and the upcoming starting of the journey of identity reconstruction.

When Irena came to Germany, she became a cold-eyed observer of the city, and she carefully observed a large number of acquaintances or strangers around her. It is worth noticing that in the novel, several Irena's acquaintances have adopted a very popular German name, and strangers are all anonymous, including the name of Irena's home country, whose name has never appeared in the whole novel. Irena used the term "another country" to refer to her country, which soaks the whole plot in an anonymous atmosphere, anonymity creates a effect of the defamiliarization and alienation in the novel, and emphasizes the other character of the people and the environment around them, forming completely roles of "the other" in opposite to Irena's self. Herta Müller seems to use this setting to

give the reader a good simulation of the defamiliar feeling of the hanging space of Irena, and also build a space for the identity reconstruction for Irena. During Irena's calm and lonely observation, she still looked at herself in the mirror intentionally or unintentionally: "Irena waited for her photo in front of the automatic camera, and the subway drove away. The wind rustled. Irena knows that there is a man in the automatic camera. Because the photos are warm. It is a kind of body temperature. Just like in another country, like the one on the passport photo, there is always a stranger in the photo. On the photo taken by the automatic camera, it is another Irena." (P147-148) From the photo of the home country to the photo of the automatic camera in the new country, the mirrored medium has changed, but the same thing is that Irena is becoming more and more vague on her own, from the initial sense of strangeness, has now become "another Irena", the loss of self-identity is full of metaphors through the unidentified self in the mirror. The presentation was a judgment on the disintegration of Irena's self-identity. Irena can't see the familiar self, seeing a stranger, the invisible self-identification of the self-identification in the mirror, is a self-confirmation of Lacan's sense. According to his mirror theory, people first obtained the first perception and recognition of the self through mirroring, realized the existence of the self, began to accept the self-image in the mirror, and obtained the first recognition and construction of the self. Self-image as a kind of "unconscious image" has become a natural metaphor for identity problems in literary works. Mirror image is an important tool for us to observe ourselves and recognize ourselves, and is also a very important theoretical entrance to Lacan's theoretical system. In the immigrant novel of *One-legged Traveler*, the image also assumes the role of identity confirmation metaphor to help portray the image of an immigrant who faces identity loss.

### **B. "The Other" as a Mirror—Self-construction of Multiple Projectionss**

In Lacan, the mirror stage is the first entrance to self-construction, meaning the birth of self-prototype; the second very important concept is the self-reference - "the other." For babies, the self-image in the mirror is not the self, but the image of "the other", and the people around it are the others. The baby opened his own "imagination domain" by confirming the image of the other. Lacan calls it a "Gestalt", a means of self-recognition that projects and merges itself with others or vice versa, ultimately anchoring broken cognition as a whole. "The 'Gestalt' is full of consistency. These consistently combine the image of 'me' with people casting themselves on 'me', with the shadows that dominate it, and the automatic mechanism. With the latter, its own world will be realized in a ambiguous way." [8] Therefore, Lacan believes that the self is fundamentally constructed, and this is based on the initial cognition of fiction, and further debut in the other. And projection, evolution becomes a alienation.

In 1960, Lacan proposed the important role of the "other" in the second mirror stage on the basis of the mirror image. For babies, this other person was mostly his own mother, and the mother's adult image assisted the baby's adult imagination. That is to say, our identity is built in that way. Actually, the other has projected some body images to us. Every image strives to integrate us into the ideals of others. The self in the mirror actually becomes a disintegration of self-ideal, not an honest reflection, because everyone wants to be the ideal he or she imagines. But this ideal is an unconscious form. It is not written into the others, but is written by the Characters of the other people who are not self-aware. This kind of writing mechanism of the other is precisely what allows us to incorporate the other into our self-observation and self-reflection. In the novel, Irena came to the new city and became the observer of the city. The new environment is a "world of others", where she reconstruct her self-cognition and identity. She observes the others and accepts the projection of the others.

The image of "others" in the novel can be divided into two categories, one is Franz, Stefan, Thomas, who is more familiar with Irena, and the other is the stranger, whom she met in the new environment. The others of the new life appeared one by one, and Irena was careful in these relationships and shackles, playing a nearly silent listener and observer. When Irena saw Stefan at the airport for the first time, she carefully observed the strangers around him. What she felt in the lively hall, which was full of greetings and seeing off, was not warmly welcome but strange feelings: "Because foreigners always hide familiar people in their throats, they are then not completely strangers. Irena wants to



repeat Stefan's last sentence, but she can't remember it. The peristalsis of the lips disturbs the hearing. Imitation is more difficult than the invention." (P. 123) "The foreigner" tries to dispel his strangeness by saying "familiar people", and Irena is one of them. Member, she wants to repeat, want to imitate the "acquaintance" Stefan, obviously she can't. "Imitation is more difficult than invention." It is no doubt the clearest footnote for Irena's next attempt to find a self-image in the projection of others. Stefan was the second person Irena has known in the new environment besides Franz. Franz represents the dream life she is looking forward to. He is a German student who met her in the home country of Irena because of a hangover. It is also Franz who opened her imagination of a new country and a new city: "Irena and Franz came to the train station, Franz went back to Marburg. There was a piece of paper in the pocket of Irena, and his address was on it. There is a picture of sand in the brain of Irena. The place where Franz puts the leaves showed where Marburg is, and the place of the stone is Frankfurt. Irena is not willing to think about farewell." (P113) This relationship in the home country also opened the prelude to her leaving of the home country, and Franz became a reason for her departure from home country to Germany. And when she finally arrived in the new country, where Franz was, she was still struggling in the relationship with Franz, she sometimes expected, and sometimes disappointed. Franz is the person closest to herself in this new environment. If Irena is the newborn of this city, then Franz is the first person she saw. If Irena is a newborn, which is looking for a new identity, then Franz for her is like the mother, in the sense of mirror theory, he is also the first image of "the other" she saw. It is not a possibility that Franz can project to her, but a sense of distance that seems to be close at hand but lost. As she wrote to Franz's card: "Hey, I sometimes think, you are closer than a window, or a branch, or a bridge, but when I want to do it, I find that I can't always find you." (P. 159)

In the new life of Irena, the presence of the other is almost the beginning of every episode in the text. In addition to the evolution of the relationship between Irena and several men in the main plot, the novel has spared no effort to describe the strangers she met. The close-up of a stranger in a specific scene sometimes transcends the existence of Irena herself. Such a setting highlights the disintegration and ambiguity of Elena herself, even absent; on the contrary, the others are more determinant in her self-construction, which is also the alienation of the subject in sense of Lacan. For example, she met a mother and son when she wrote the card to Franz in the subway station. The child's eyes looked at all the women around him, but only Irena could not be seen. (See P.129-130) The novel creates a various other-image in the new life of Irena. For Irena, this immigrant woman who is struggling to find herself in a new city and at the same time is born from the burden of her home country; this is undoubtedly a world of the others, in which she tried to repeatedly confirm herself. Numerous images of the other, or her self-reconstruction, near or far, have produced subtle projections and reflections. In the sentient beings of these other people, the image of strange women is particularly heavy. For example, the mother that Irena met when she chose a bed in the room of the refugee camp, chatted with her about the daily life of the child and did not intend to poke the pain in the sleeping alone in a double bed of Irena (see P.137-138), Irena accepts the "positive" projection of the other who appears in the image of a mother, and at the same time reflects the sad situation of her own as a lonely person. And the red-haired woman she met in the second-hand shoe store, the novel carefully described the whole process of her careful selection of shoes, until finally she put on new shoes and left the store, "The woman with pink hair has gone, went to the street, and walked into City. Irena walked to the door. She walked very slowly, so she was not noticed. She wanted to run away and wanted to disappear, just like the woman." (P.151) This situation is the "negative" projection from the other, causing Irena to try to imitate, but can't help ending with her worries.

Whether we identify ourselves in the mirror image at the very beginning, or project multiple identities and images from others, we follow Irena through these seemingly uncomplicated plot development, and with the help of Lacan's self-construction theory, we can clearly delineate a journey of self-seeking. A traveler is a traveler who is always on the road. The traveler she is, by definition, hints at the suspense of a life she never actually arrives at. Even at the end of the story, when she finally acquires German citizenship, Irena's haunting anxiety about identity and untracked fulfillment are the most unspoken and brutal truths. The last sentence of the novel is "Irena does not want to think

about farewell." The words first appeared when Franz said goodbye to her in her home country. After that, when Franz left her home country, she experienced a real separation. Here again, this sentence hides the following real separation, which is the separation from self-identity, rather than the "completeness" brought by a piece of nationality certificate.

### **An Unreachable Journey of Self-Seeking**

As the title suggests, Irena is on a difficult journey. She didn't really lose a leg. Irena, who is able-bodied, embarked on a journey that was not an escape from her native country to Berlin, but a journey of self-search and reconstruction in the immigrant situation. The self she was trying to confirm in the mirror image and others was never really reached. Arriving of Irena also has two meanings: one is to arrive in Germany to obtain true citizenship; the other is to reconfirm her identity and renew her life after successful self-construction. It could be argued that Irena had arrived with one leg, that she had finally acquired her nationality, and that the more important "other leg" was missing. For the traveler, the most afraid of the journey is not difficulties, but the moment of parting. At the end of the novel, when Irena took German citizenship, she again thought about leaving. The suspense of despair and the absence and failure of the real self is rendered vividly. And Irena's journey of reconstructing herself, in the mirror Lacan gives us, is actually a virtual image that doesn't exist. At the end of the novel, it seems to stop abruptly, gives readers time to observe a moment of silence for the final failure of Irena's journey of identity reconstruction. In fact, Lacan had already announced the impossibility of self-realization gloomily, let alone immigrants who carried out the second search and reconstruction of identity. Because our journey to find ourselves has been a failure from the moment we set off-the moment of self-confirmation in a mirror image. Our first self is nothing but an alienated other, and the basis of our confirmation is "nothingness" from beginning to end. We start from the mirror self in the childhood, and constantly try to complete and construct the self-image, but in fact, we just build a alienated subject under the mirror of the other.

The tragedy of Irena in the novel only uses the shell of "immigrant situation" and "love sorrows and joy" to give a plausible excuse for her identity failure. Little imagine, whether the tragedy of the identity construction of the immigrant Irena in the novel or the self-confirmation trip, we'll start from infancy curious to find ourselves. The actual end of the two journeys is a "never land" in the theory of mirror of Lacan, whose philosophizing of self is combined with the subject structuralism criticism. Self-identity construction is a process, in which the first step wrong is, and then fault step by step, it is a "not existed truth", therefore is a "never land".

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