

LOVE-DEATH OF HANNA SCHMITZ: A NARRATIVE HISTORY IN BERNHARD SCHLINK'S *THE READER*

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Abstract: *This article aims to discuss historical context in Bernhard Schlink's 'The Reader'. The issue is addressed through the perspective of sociology of literature. The history of the holocaust sets the stage for the love story between Hanna and Michael. The history of the novel and the love story inside are interrelated. It proves that literary writers provide a strong setting in the narrative of the novel. At the end, the novel became a documentary of the imagination and creativity of the writer in relation to historical and/or social contexts. Through this novel the author highlight the tragic and dark history of Germany by ending the life of the major character, Hanna, the representation of illiteracy and unawareness.*

Keywords: *context; history; sociology of literature; illiteracy*

1. INTRODUCTION

“If we rely on stories to guide us through life, we want the guide to be reliable and truthful, and to tell it like it really is; however, we also want the guide to be artful and witty, and to lead us along paths with which we are familiar. The historical novel was emerged to satisfy these conflicting desires. It is inescapably a contradiction in terms: a nonfictional fiction; a factual fantasy; a truthful deception.” (Carnes, 2004:14).

The historical and social background of the society influences the process of creating literary works, both in terms of the content and the structure (Swingewood, 1972:23-24). The existence of the author in society also influences his work so that a particular society which supports the author by itself will make a certain type of literary work. This tendency is based on the assumption that social norms are normative or contain regulatory elements that must be obeyed. The views, values and attitudes are influenced by the prevailing social order. This is a factor that determines what the author must write, for whom the literary work was written, and the purpose of writing.

Likewise is the novel *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink. The novel shows the holocaust theme in Germany with the spice of love and humanity in the narrative. Schlink (1944) is a novelist and legal expert. He began writing fiction in the late 1980s, several years after he became professor of jurisprudence. His first work was a detective novel. Furthermore, the work of *Der Vorleser (The Reader, 1995)* became the bestseller in Germany and was later

translated into more than 20 languages (Grange, 2009:212-214). The Reader made its name internationally known in 1995 (Assman, 2010:1). The work discusses humanity and love in a different perspective (Taberner, 2005:109-110). In his presentation, the love story between Hanna Schmitz and Michael helped shape the storyline that become an interesting story that the writer will review in this paper.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The sociological approach in literary study comes from the view that literature is a reflection of society. These sociology aspects play an important role and construct the author's point of view (Selden and Widdowson, 1993: 87). Through literature, the author reveals the ups and downs of the lives of the people they know as clearly as possible. Starting from that view, literary analysis or criticism carried out focused or more concerned with social aspects contained in a literary work and questioning aspects that support the formation and development of the life order (Atar, 1989:46). In its development the sociological approach is directed at studying values. This is based on the understanding that literary works are related to the nature of the situation in history. Literary works are works that present the most unsolved problems of interpretation, which are related to the meaning (order of values) and the form (structure) of the social and historical conditions found in human life.

2.1 Narrative History

The rapid development of humanity studies might as well trigger the development of sociological studies. The sociological approach, throughout its history, especially in the Western world, has always occupied important position. Such an approach is considered capable of reconstructing the author's world view because literary work is part of people's lives (Selden & Widdowson, 1993:87). Authors as individual subjects try to produce their world views (*vision du monde*) to their collective subjects. The view of the world displayed by the author through problematic hero is a meaningful global structure. This world view is not merely an empirical fact that is direct, but is an idea, aspiration, and feeling that can unite a social group. That world view has a concrete form in literary works. World view is not a fact. The world view does not have objective existence, but is a theoretical expression of the conditions and interests of a particular class of society (Goldman, 1981).

Significations that are elaborated by individual subjects to the surrounding social realities show that literary works are rooted in certain cultures and certain societies. The existence of such literature makes literature can be positioned as a socio-cultural document. The existence

of literature which is full of social values makes it not passive to various sociological approaches (Laurenson, 1972:136).

3. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN THEMES

3.1. Historical Background in *The Reader*

In *The Reader*, the history of the Holocaust in Germany during 1933-1945 was the setting of the love story between Hanna and Michael. The Holocaust (from Greek: *holokauston* which means "completely burnt offering") was a systematic genocide carried out by Nazi Germany against various ethnic, religious, national and secular groups during World War II. Jews in Europe were the main victims in the holocaust, which the Nazis called "the Last Settlement of Jewish Problems". The number of Jewish victims is generally said to reach six million. The genocide was created by Adolf Hitler, among others, by shooting, torturing and putting poisonous gas in Jewish villages and concentration camps.

The term holocaust was well-known when Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. However, the anti-semitism itself was present from 1348-1450 when Jews were often accused of poisoning the well during the Black Death (Voigtlaender & Voth, 2011:1). In Hitler's time the hatred towards Jews increased dramatically. His ideas in *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) began to be implemented and the Law on the Implementation of Action or the "Law on the Destruction of the People's and Empire's Difficulties" was established. In the Act, the Jews were considered as a nation that resulted in Germany losing in World War I so that it must be destroyed. Then, the death of German President Paul von Hindenburg (1934) made Hitler appointed *Fuehrer* (leader). To realize his dream in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler formed *Geheime Staatspolizei* - the secret state police - and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) - Hitler's personal troops. The force brought Jews to the concentration camp to be slaughtered in the Auschwitz gas chamber. Besides Auschwitz, the other main camps are Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, and Chelmno. During Hitler's leadership, Jews were imprisoned and killed without trial. Since Hitler published *Mein Kampf* in 1925, the Jewish race is considered inferior to the Aryan race, the German nation. Hitler's goal was to build a strong German nation, consisting of superior people (*Urbarmensch*).

The massacre carried out by Adolf Hitler and Nazi (German National Labor Party) against the Jews was a grave violation of human rights. Hitler's and the Nazis atrocities and were gradually revealed after US forces occupied Germany in April 1945. One of the parts in *The Reader* related to the holocaust was when Hanna was convicted of the confiscation of 300 Jews in the church. Hanna was then sentenced to life.

"Did you not know that you were sending the prisoners to their death?"

"Yes, but the new ones came, and the old ones had to make room for the new ones."

"So because you wanted to make room, you said you and you and you have to be sent back to be killed?"

Hanna didn't understand what the presiding judge was getting at.

"I ... I mean ... so what would you have done?" Hanna meant it as a serious question. She did not know what she should or could have done differently, and therefore wanted to hear from the judge, who seemed to know everything, what he would have done (Schlink, 1998:86).

The conversation above is a talk during the court between Hanna and the Judge; this quote is taken from chapter 6. This conversation clearly reflects how Hanna was unaware of the situation. Hanna's purpose is protecting her image, that she was not literate. Her shameful of being illiterate covers her mind to be aware of the consequences that she would take if she admits that she was the writer of the report. Her illiteracy should have been the key to make her free from the accusation. However, her unawareness makes her choose to admit something that she had not done. In Germany at that time, being illiterate was something that was very shameful. The society's point of view about literacy represents how people judge each other. In this case, Hanna did not want to be blamed as an illiterate person.

3.2. Hanna Schmitz' Love - Death

Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* raised the story of a teenager named Michael who fell in love with a middle-aged woman, Hanna Schmitz. Michael is a student and Hanna is a tram conductor. They have such an intense love in the midst of their respective activities. Michael was fifteen when he firstly met Hanna. He was on his way home from school when he suddenly threw up from and covered his body with his own vomit. Suddenly a "woman seized [his] arm and pulled [him] through the dark entryway into the courtyard... . The woman turned on the tap, washed [his] hand first, and then cupped both of hers and threw water in [his] face". After that, the woman hugged him who was crying and took him home (Schlink, 1998:6).

After the vomit incident, the relation between them becomes closer. Started from Michael brought Hanna flower the next day after she helped him (p. 10) until the next five day when they had their first sexual intercourse (p. 22). As their relationship grew more intimate, there was an agreement between them before they had sexual intercourse. Michael had to read a story (of Leo Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Charles Dickens, Balzac, Homer's *Odyssey*, etc.) first and then made love to her (36). The agreement was made partly because Hanna liked the story of the books but she could not read.

Their relationship came to end when Hanna was promoted to a higher position. Hanna just left without leaving a message to Michael. A few years later, they met again when Michael had become a Law Faculty student and Hanna was accused of being an SS member.

In the trial of human rights violations, the presiding judge showed Hanna's written report on the incident which killed about 300 Jews in the burning church. Hanna herself admitted to the trial that she had made the report.

“My handwriting? You want my handwriting?...” The judge, the prosecutor, and Hanna’s lawyer discussed whether a person’s handwriting retains its character over more than fifteen years and can be identified. Hanna listened and tried several times to say or ask something, and was becoming increasingly alarmed. Then she said, “You don’t have to call an expert. I admit I wrote the report.” (Schlink, 1998:129).

Hanna made the confession to cover her inability to write and read. She was sentenced more severely than her colleagues for being accused of making daily reports. The Auschwitz Frankfurt trial was a trial that called Hanna to give her testimony and was held in the period between the end of 1963 to 1965. The trial was considered the most famous prosecution since the end of World War II (Pendas, 2000:397). Judges and prosecutors experience inner conflicts in prosecuting criminals due to conflicting legal and moral considerations. If according to the law in Germany after the fall of Hitler's government, the crimes committed by the convicted persons must have violated the law. However, these crimes occurred in the past, namely under the laws of the Third Reich that was proclaimed by Hitler so that their crimes were not illegal at that time.

These doubts not only have those who judge, but also those who are tried. Hanna's dazed behavior at the same time felt embarrassed that acknowledging the report that was not written at all not only reflected that there was still a problem of illiteracy in the lower classes such as wardens. It also reflects that Hanna's illiteracy is a representation of moral awareness (Castillo, 2018:5). The feeling Hanna felt at the time was only shame because she did not understand what she had done. So with no calculation and driven by embarrassment Hanna gave a false statement to cover up her shortcomings. The moral unconscious experienced by Hanna reflected the social conditions of the community at that time. On the one hand, there were those who were educated but still participated in crimes during Hitler's time. On the other hand, there are those who are not aware of their position and do not realize that they have committed a crime.

Furthermore, Michael, who knew that Hanna could not write and read, did not react to relieve Hanna's verdict. Michael did not meet Hanna and did not help Hanna even though he knew that Hanna's statement — that Hanna had signed the report — was wrong and would drag Hanna to a very severe sentence.

“What would I say to her? That I had seen through her lifelong lie? ...I had no idea what that might be, nor did I know how to face her and say that after what she had done it was

right that her short—and medium—term future would be prison I didn't know how to face her and say anything at all. I didn't know how to face her.” (Schlink, 1998:143).

Michael then had the idea to entertain Hanna in prison. He read fictional stories recorded on tapes, then the tapes were sent to Hanna who was in prison. Inside the prison, Hanna began learning to write and read through tapes Michael sent her. Therefore, Hanna managed to send a letter to Michael whom she still called "kid". In this story, without consent Michael helped Hanna to realize the moral burden of her role in the Holocaust by increasing her literacy skills.

Time passed, the prison official informed Michael that Hanna would be released the following week. Michael finally visited Hanna and prepared a workplace for Hanna to socialize.

“I sat next to Hanna and smelled an old woman... I moved closer. I had seen that I had disappointed her before, and I wanted to do better, make up for it.

“I'm glad you're getting out.”

“You are?”

“Yes, and I'm glad you'll be nearby.” I told her about the apartment and the job I had found for her, about the cultural and social programs available in that part of the city, about the public library” (Schlink, 1998:197).

The conversation between Michael and Hanna shows that Michael did not want to live with Hanna. "But why should I have given her a place in my life?" (Schlink, 1998:198). The question confirms Michael's concern for his current feelings towards Hanna. Despite being divorced, Michael seems to be worried about deciding whether he will be with Hanna after Hanna is released from prison.

The next day Hanna was found dead hanging herself. Based on this incident, Hanna seems to be depressed after having a moral awareness of what she did in the past. Michael's half-hearted attitude in helping him reorganize his life only made Hanna feel isolated and depressed. That incident was so horrible for Michael's feelings. Regrets arose in Michael's heart. He then decided to immediately write his story with Hanna (Schlink, 1998:216). He also donated some money (according to Hanna's will) on behalf of Hanna Schmitz to Jewish League Against Illiteracy.

4. CONCLUSION

Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* is a documentary of the writer's imagination and creativity in relation to social relations. The important thing that concerns the writer is the theme of love and humanity that is displayed through the story of Hanna and Michael. The story forms an interesting narrative with the Holocaust as the historical background.

Through the novel's narrative, it can be concluded that the author with his work tries to show the dark history of the nation (Nazi and holocaust stories) as the moral message that forms the story. The strength of the historical context makes *The Reader* a reflection of the history of society. The love story of Hanna and Michael is a means for writers to convey the state of society at that time, especially in terms of moral awareness and moral indifference. Moral indifference is rooted in moral unconsciousness, as experienced by Hanna, which was caused by factors of illiteracy.

The course of the story of Michael and Hanna's love brought him to a moral awareness which weighed on him and led to her death. However, the suicide committed by Hanna was also greatly influenced by the attitude of Michael who was still hesitant to live with Hanna. The love story of Michael and Hanna was designed in such a way by the author to highlight the history of the German state itself which is very dark and tragic story. This dark history that feels overwhelmed to remember, but certainly not to be forgotten. Finally, as Schlink said (Grange, 2009:214), this paper closes with "there is no such thing as pure memory".

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