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Postmodern Narratives of Holocaust: An Investigation into Collective Memory and Cultural Trauma in *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink

A Graduation Research Project

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Abstract

The present research aims at examining the postmodern narratives of the Holocaust and the fact that fiction most of the time conveys the truth more than historians, especially when it comes to Germany's history. It sheds light on two concepts, namely, Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory, followed by a clear analysis of how Schlink portrays the effects of trauma and memory within the characters, as well as their coping mechanism and the way it resembles Germany's war and postwar generations' trauma of the Holocaust. The analysis shows Michael Berg's sexual, emotional, and educational exploitation by a woman twice his age named Hanna Schmitz, and the trauma he is left with. The present research will examine the dominant themes in the novel, *Shame and Guilt*, addressing the ways Schlink portrayed in his novel how harmful and irrational the fear of shame can be if it is not dealt with properly through one of the main characters, Hanna Schmitz. As the analysis reveal, the characters of *The Reader* contain the key traits found in Germany's war and postwar generation, readers are positioned to imagine what a victim of the Holocaust went through. It puts forward that survivors also have a voice to narrate their experience without concealing out any part in favor of the perpetrators.

Keywords: Holocaust Narratives, *The Reader*, Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory,

Schlink's *The Reader*: An Introduction

The Reader (German: *Der Vorleser*) is a novel written by judge and law professor Bernhard Schlink. It was published in 1995 in Germany and 1997 in America in English. It is considered as Holocaust literature since it takes place in Germany during post-World War 2. The story deals with how post-war generations of Germany should deal with the war generation by making each character represent a different generation. Since its publication, the novel has become very controversial not only because it deals with the Holocaust which is a sensitive subject, but also because it revolves around an inappropriate affair between Michael and Hanna who is twice his age without the author portraying the relationship as something wrong.

The novel is narrated through the point of view of the main character, Michael Berg. It is divided into three parts, the first part is about Michael falling ill and being nursed by Hanna, shortly after they start a love affair all throughout the summer. During this summer their routine is basically the boy reading literature to the woman and then making love. But one day Hanna leaves him without any notice which leaves Michael shattered. The second part of the novel is several years later when Michael is a law student attending a trial about multiple women who served as SS guards during the Holocaust. And to his surprise sees Hanna as one of the defendants. During the trial he realizes that Hanna is illiterate and is ashamed of admitting that when she is asked to provide a handwriting sample to prove she did not write a letter which was evidence of being guilty of the death of 400 innocent Jewish women. Instead of admitting she is illiterate, she chooses to take the blame and get life in prison. This makes Michael feel guilty because he was the only one who knew about her illiteracy and speaking up could have saved her from being sentenced but he chose to stay quiet. In the third and last part of the novel, Michael has a daughter and has become a legal historian, while Hanna has grown old and grey and almost unrecognizable behind bars. During her time Michael sent her tape recordings of him reading her favorite pieces of literature which helped her learn to read and write. Eventually, Hanna ends her miserable and depressing

life the day before her release. Before her death, she left a small amount of money which she asked Michael to give to a survivor. In the end, he visits the survivor who he has given Hanna's money and tells her about his relationship with Hanna, an admission that forms the climax of his long struggle with guilt, shame, and responsibility.

This paper will begin by providing clear definitions of the key aspects, Holocaust Narratives, Cultural Trauma, and Collective Memory in the first section. The second section consists of a brief literature review of the articles, researches, and books this paper has cited. Then, the third section explains the difficulties authors face while narrating about the Holocaust and the importance of fiction in conveying the truth about history. A clear analysis of the main aspects of *The Reader* is provided in the last section, the analysis consists of the author's portrayal of trauma, memory, shame, and guilt within the characters.

Section One

1.1 Research Questions

How is Cultural Trauma portrayed in *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink?

What are the effects of Cultural Trauma presented in the novel?

How is Collective Memory and Guilt displayed in the novel?

1.2 Definitions of Keys Words

1.2.1 Holocaust Narratives

MacGregor (2011) argues that survivors of the Holocaust have set some rules for telling their story which makes it different from other historical events in a way that it has its own special way of being told and remembered. These rules have been accepted by the ones who were affected by the Holocaust and they are usually found in literary works.

According to Christman (2016) the process of narrating a story begins when the individual notices a certain feeling, then questions about what caused that feeling develop both inside and outside of that individual. And once the important factors are identified, the individual has a clear understanding of the event and they can tell why they are feeling what they are feeling, that way a person can write a story based on their experience. Therefore, narratives help individuals to use prior experience to understand, anticipate, and react to future events. In other words, they play a vital role in social interactions. People connect, support, and shape one another by sharing

stories. Narratives work as a bridge linking not only thoughts and emotions within an individual but also linking other individuals together.

“Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. While this new scientific concept clarifies causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions, it also illuminates a neglected domain of social responsibility and political action. By constructing cultural traumas, social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations, not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering, but may also take on board some significant moral responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma in a manner that assumes such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships that allow them to share the suffering of others.” (Alexander, 2016, p.4)

“In the nineteenth century, psychologists borrowed the term to create the concept of psychological trauma, which describes a ‘wound’ within the psyche. Both of these uses of trauma refer to an individual experience. By contrast, within sociology, trauma can refer to a collective experience, where the ‘wound’ is located at the level of the group.” (Woods, 2019)

Cultural trauma is characterized by an aggressive and overwhelming event that is believed to overpower one or more essential aspects of a culture or

the whole culture itself. In order to understand this aspect, we have to realize that it relies heavily on emotions. This aspect essentially develops when an event truly threatens a culture that the people in the society identify with and affects how they view themselves. And any reminder of this event will trigger something in the people's emotions. So simply put, if it does not make the people feel emotionally bad, it is not considered as a Cultural trauma. (Smelser et al., 2004)

The formation of collective trauma in a society comes from individual pain and suffering. Yet it is the threat to our collective identity that really matters rather than personal well-being. When a person suffers from a traumatic event they often suppress and deny their feelings, but will eventually face it and find a way to cope with it. But when a whole group experiences something traumatic, they handle it in a different way. Instead of focusing on personal feelings, they narrate stories and create symbols to make sense of what happened. And through storytelling and interpretations, they can face the threat together. Although many people suffer alone, it is the way society copes with their sufferings, pain, and past traumas that turns into a shared cultural trauma. (Alexander, 2016)

1.2.4 Collective Memory

Assmann (1995) defines Collective Memory in his *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity* as the shared recollection and understanding of a culture's past incidents and traditions. These memories are passed down from one generation to the next generation through the traditions and rituals of that culture.

Memories are reconstructed by present conditions and they are not only static records. It was Halbwachs (1997) who first came up with the concept of collective memory and he rejected the idea that memory is individual and exists in isolation but is rather impacted by social factors. He explained in "Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire" (1994) that what shapes individuals in a society are the beliefs and collective experiences they share among themselves, and not the other way around. Collective memory, as expressed by Nora (1978), represents what a group recollects from their past and how they interpret it. (Cordonnier et al., 2022)

Researches on social representations of history suggest that collective memory serves three primary functions. First, when a group of individuals share similar interpretations of their past, it helps them create and maintain a sense of belonging to that group. This serves as a primary role in building a social identity. The second function of collective memory is that it allows groups to understand and navigate with other groups. By sharing historical interpretations, they can tell which group is a friend and which is an enemy. The last function is that collective memory not only helps

shape our mindsets and understandings of the world but it also helps individuals learn from past mistakes and make better decisions for future incidents. (Ibid)

Section Two: Literature Review

Jeffrey Alexander's influential work, "Culture Trauma, Morality, and Solidarity: The Social Construction of Holocaust and Other Mass Murders," argues that traumatic events like the Holocaust are not only historical events but they are rather socially constructed through the process of collective memory. One of his main concepts is Cultural Trauma, he defines its characteristics as a sense of victimization and a scar on a society's identity. Through examining how a culture remembers a haunting, traumatic event, Alexander shows how cultural trauma is embedded in collective memory.

"Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" by Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka is an important contribution to the field of memory studies, because it explores the relationship collective memory with a cultures identity. They argue that collective memory is not simply just a memory but a dynamic process in which a society can identify their identity with. Moreover, Assmann and Czaplicka demonstrate how cultural memory helps as a framework for understanding the past, interpreting the present, and predicting the future.

Schlink's *The Reader* portrays how the different generations of Germany deal with trauma, memory and guilt through two main characters. Maider Gañán Andrades has explored how the characters deal with memory, guilt, and forgiveness, alongside of a clear insight into the difficulties of German identity in the wake of national trauma

in “The Sins of the Parents: An Analysis of German Trauma and Memory After WWII in Bernhard Schlink's Novel *The Reader*”.

Bill Niven examines how shame shapes characters like Hanna Schmitz and influences postwar German society in “Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* and the problem of shame”. He explores the ways the novel treats guilt, complicity, and recovery, offering insights into forgiveness and reconciliation. Through this analysis, Niven points out the how *The Reader* reflects on human experience and the aftermath of trauma.

The aim of this paper is to put the concepts of cultural trauma and collective memory on display according to the researchers mentioned above, and find their characteristics in Schlink’s novel, *The Reader*. It will also shed light on the proper ways an author should narrate a fictional story about the Holocaust while considering all the rules set by survivors. Lastly, this paper provides a clear analysis on the novels portrayal of shame and guilt through the characters.

Section Three: Holocaust in Literature

3.1 Ethical Considerations of Holocaust Narratives

Since the Holocaust is an extremely sensitive subject, writers have to be very careful while narrating stories about it. When a survivor reads these stories, they should not feel offended or feel like the perpetrators have not been portrayed as heartless as they actually were.

Hawthorn has noted (2019), that all writings about the Holocaust face ethical problems, because there is not a clear right and wrong way to do it. It is important to remember and document everything that happened, but on the other hand, the victims deserve more than just to be recorded as statistics. Some of these rights include not only having their stories told truthfully and honestly, but they also deserve to have their privacy kept from being out in the open. Their inhumane, cruel, and traumatizingly disgusting experiences should not be put on display for everyone to see. Though the Nazis disrespected these simple human rights, it does not mean they disappear after death. The job and responsibility of telling a story truthfully and respecting one's dignity could be a tough one.

“The heterogeneous nature of familial, communicative memory, including memories of German suffering, can proliferate in private, but in public must be integrated into that normative framework.” (Cornshaw, 2010, p.146)

The difficulties that writers face while writing about the Holocaust are not physically impossible but rather a moral rule. It is important to note that any representation or narration of the Holocaust can never fully convey the true experience of the reality the victims went through, it will always be a representation from the author's perspective. For example, if the perspective is of a Holocaust survivor, they might depict the experience as something horrifying and gut-wrenching, but if the perspective changes to a surviving SS officer they might view that same experience as a successful career opportunity (Richardson, 2005).

3.2 The Role of Fiction in Conveying the Truth

The holocaust is often seen and thought of as something that is depressingly terrible and extremely unique, this makes it really hard for writers to depict the stories about it accurately, without offending anyone. They are expected to follow certain rules during their attempts to portray the horrible things that happened. Some authors are trying different and newer methods in their writings, and there are some critics that believe using only eyewitnesses is not enough to spread their stories, but most people would like there to be no changes in Holocaust stories, they want them to be as raw and real as possible. Therefore, there are many rules that an author should go by when it comes to portraying the Holocaust in stories. Some people think that it should not be written, read, or even talked about because of how awful and inhumane the Holocaust is, while others believe it is better to put it out there in detail so that people can learn

from it. The main questions are whether we should write about the Holocaust, how should it be done, and most importantly who should write it and be the voice of it. When it comes to the Holocaust, storytelling gets really sensitive because there is a lot of pressure to do it perfectly and not add any incorrect details to the stories (Busse, 2002).

Postmodernism suggests that fiction can convey profound truths, even if it does not get every single detail accurately. This is particularly relevant when it comes to Holocaust narratives, which have a system of writing that hides most truths and controls history because most of the surviving documents were written by perpetrators. As a result, artists use fictional stories to give voice to the victims and tell their stories without concealing anything or giving false information. While it is common in postmodern fiction to believe that historical events can have more than one side of the story, this idea is extremely risky when it comes to the Holocaust, where truth is very important. Altering facts in fiction can go against what the Holocaust scholars are trying to pursue. Moreover, by not focusing on getting the facts of history accurately, the postmodern approach might make it seem like the Holocaust deniers have a point when in reality they clearly do not (Ibid).

In addition, fictional stories of the Holocaust have many advantages, one being that they are much easier to read than memoirs of the survivors, they also might make people more interested and engaged with the stories. Lastly, fiction has the ability to

imagine situations that the survivors never went through such as the gas chamber, so fictional stories can help us fill in the gaps that the survivors' testimonies left unfilled (Richardson, 2005).

Section Four: The Analysis of The Reader

4.1 The Representation of Cultural Trauma in *The Reader*

One of the main concepts in Schlink's *The Reader* is trauma and it is present in both of the main characters, Michael Berg and Hannah Schmitz, but it affects them differently. Each of those two main characters embodies the different generations of Germany. Hanna, who is a 36-year-old woman, represents the war generation, while Michael who is a 15-year-old boy, represents the postwar generation. The characters cope differently with their traumas about their pasts just like the generations they are from.

For Hannah, the recollection of the time when she was in the concentration camp is extremely traumatic for her because it reminds her of all the severe consequences she had to face due to her illiteracy that she has been keeping hidden from the world her entire life. She voluntarily joined the SS because she did not want to accept the job offer from Siemens and even when the war ended, she continuously moved from one place to another avoiding every letter from the court because she could not read them. While she was working as a guard at the camps, she would constantly pick out the weakest and youngest children to read to her because she was fully aware that they were destined to die therefore they were not able to expose her secret of being illiterate, which left her as the only survivor who knew her incapability of reading and writing. Throughout the whole novel, we can see how illiteracy shapes her life, it limits her choices and puts her in unwanted situations when she tries to conceal it. An example of that is in Chapter Eleven (Part One) when they are on vacation and one morning Michael goes to get breakfast, he leaves a note. Hanna got angry at him because she could not read it, and instead of admitting her illiteracy, she acted like she did not see the note.

“You did? I don’t see a note”.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I’d love to believe you. But I don’t see any note” (Schlink, 54)

However, at the trial, she is forced to face her illiteracy when asked to provide a handwriting sample to prove that she did not write a report that describes what happened during the fire in the church, along with the names of the victims and the ones in charge. Although she did not write that report, but because she is too ashamed of admitting she was illiterate, she admits to writing the report saying “You don’t have to call an expert. I admit I wrote the report.” (Schlink, 128) When they were about to compare her handwriting with the handwriting on the report. Therefore, yet again, she would rather hide her secret and face consequences than admit she is illiterate. For Hanna, her illiteracy is connected directly to her traumatic past with the Nazis she is always trying to avoid and forget.

Trauma plays a huge role in Michael’s relationship with Hanna. Ever since their first interaction, Michael cannot keep her out of his thoughts. He constantly tries to understand her actions, figure out her personality, and who she is or what she is thinking, and yet he keeps her a secret and never tells anyone about her. This is apparent in Chapter Seven (Part One) when he gets home late for dinner and says “[...] I’d lost my way, that I’d wanted to walk through the memorial garden in the cemetery to Molkerkur...” (Schlink, 27). Therefore, Hanna acts as a trauma for Michael because she lives in his head unconsciously, and he refuses to talk about her with anyone when he knows he should. And due to their age gap, Hanna is like a mother figure for Michael, so when she leaves due to her trauma to start a new life without any warning or explanation, it leaves Michael with the feeling of abandonment and loss which triggers trauma in him. Therefore, the trauma that came from abandonment for Michael is parallel to two because he lost both a mother and a lover (Andrades, 2019-2020).

4.2 Collective Memory in the Novel

Michael is not only a part of but also represents the postwar generation. Meanwhile, the war generation is embodied by Hanna. Before Hanna's imprisonment, she somehow manages to live in the present without talking about her past of being illiterate and having connections with the Nazis. She is constantly suppressing those memories and tries to forget them just like how her generation is trying to escape from their past. Meanwhile, Michael keeps on trying to keep the past alive. He is struggling to overcome his trauma which is all due to his memories of his time with Hanna and is unable to escape it. Just like how his generation refuses to forget about their past and is constantly asking questions about it, Michael also tries to understand Hanna's crime and why she committed it.

The novel begins with Michael's memory of his first encounter with Hanna when he vomited on the street and she took care of him. His repeated dreams of Hanna's apartment building serve as reminders of unresolved emotional ties and the troubled past of Germany. The building itself, described as dark and isolated, serves as a symbol of Germany's haunted past. Michael's memories become more bitter and betrayed as his relationship with Hanna develops, demonstrating the complicated relationship between memory and emotion. The climax of this emotional disturbance is reached when Michael meets Hanna during the trial when the courtroom serves as a metaphor for the revelation of dark secrets about the tainted past of Germany. Michael's emotional distance throughout the trial towards Hanna reflects his emotional numbness due to his memories and past experiences with her (Slabbert, 2009).

Furthermore, With the help of memory, people can create a sense of separation from upsetting truths and protect themselves from the full impact of the past. However, memory also can cause immediacy, transporting people with surprising clarity back to the center of horrific situations. Michael's experience highlights how difficult it is to

balance these conflicting aspects of memory since he finds it difficult to understand his feelings and behaviors in relation to the larger historical context of the Holocaust.

4.3 Shame and Guilt: The Trial

The portrayal of Michael and Hanna's story in the novel exposes the horror and brutal acts committed in the camps carried out by the Nazis. Both the characters struggle internally with the feeling of shame and guilt which raises issues of justice and healing through forgiveness so that the society of Germany would resolve the breaks within German society caused by both the legal system and the individual psyche. In addition, Hanna's crime in *The Reader* represents the crimes of the Nazis. (Abou-Agag, 2014)

The trial is the exact moment where Michael has to confront his past and investigate the impact of his relationship with Hanna when he was a teenager. The age gap between them puts Hanna in a negative light because it portrays her as a manipulative predator who takes advantage of Michael's emotions, body, and his literacy exactly like how she took advantage and held power over the inmates in the camp. Due to having an affair with a woman twice his age, Michael feels so ashamed that he is unable to tell his friends nor his family about the relationship. Furthermore, during the trial, Hanna's shame is brought to light and her secret of being illiterate is exposed to Michael as well as the readers. All throughout her life she has dealt with keeping her illiteracy a secret. She rejected the job offer in the tram because it required reading and writing, she gets mad at Michael for leaving her a note and goes as far as physically abusing him, she is full-on willing to take the blame for a crime that she has not commit only to hide her secret of being illiterate. It appears that her shame of being unable to read and write is much bigger than being an SS guard who is not only aware of sending innocent Jewish women to Auschwitz knowing they will be killed but also

responsible for having hundreds of them burn to death and not do anything about it. Finally, Hanna's guilt becomes apparent when she asks the judge, "What would you have done?" (Schlink, 128). She knew what she had done was wrong, but there was no other option than for her to try to defend herself and ignore the guilt. (Ibid)

There is barely any evidence that proves Hanna is anti-Semitic. Instead, the story of her life is the perfect example of a story of shame, growing up with National Socialist anti-Semitism provided a foundation for her to mentally cover up her inability. Schlink's novel exposes Hanna's deep-seated shame and insecurity and her desperate attempts to hide it in order to avoid social criticism and judgment. She always tries to find a way to make up for her inferiority complex, for example, she uses many cruel strategies to be dominant over Michael in their relationship, like ignoring him, being cold to him, setting conditions, threatening him, and even physically abusing him during their vacation in Chapter Eleven (Part One):

The only fight we had took place in Amorbach. I had woken up early, dressed quietly, and crept out of the room. I wanted to bring up breakfast and also see if I could find a flower shop open where I could get a rose for Hanna. I had left a note on the night table. "Good morning! Bringing breakfast, be right back," or words to that effect. When I returned, she was standing in the room, trembling with rage and white-faced. "How could you go just like that?"

I put down the breakfast tray with the rose on it and wanted to take her in my arms. "Hanna."

"Don't touch me." She was holding the narrow leather belt that she wore around her dress; she took a step backwards and hit me across the face with it. My lip split and I tasted blood. It didn't hurt. I was horrorstruck. She swung again. (Schlink, 54)

Hanna's shame controls her actions and decisions during the trial which results in an odd combination of lies and confessions. Her methods are ignoring situations to protect her illiteracy without regarding truths and moral principles. She shows this strategy even in court when she chooses life in prison over admitting her inability to read and write which would have lessened her guilt (Niven, 2003).

The Reader points out how harmful and unreasonable the fear of shame could be if it is not dealt with. Because Hanna is so ashamed of being exposed to the public, she does not even consider any solution like going to a night school and getting a proper

education. The novel looks at how the feeling of shame affects different people who were a part of the Holocaust and its aftermath, and how it causes them to be emotionally numb as a coping mechanism. In the end, it provides an in-depth exploration of shame told from the perspective of an autobiography of shame (Ibid).

Section Five: Conclusion

5.1 Conclusions

Based on the discussion and the sources used to reinforce the analysis, the following conclusions are drawn:

The Reader is a postmodern Holocaust fiction that revolves around two main characters named Michael Berg and Hanna Schmitz, the two of them struggle with trauma from their past, guilt from their mistakes, shame from their actions, and the excruciating memory about their past.

Cultural Trauma happens when a group of people go through the same traumatic event which leaves them mentally scarred for the rest of their lives, and therefore, they will all remember and interpret this event the same way, which is called Collective Memory. These two concepts help the individuals of a society identify themselves, understand and learn from their past, interpret their present, and predict their future.

With the use of these concepts as well as one of the two main themes in the novel, shame and guilt, Schlink has structured his main characters in a way that each of them represents a different generation of Germany. While Hanna acts as a war Generation, Michael acts as a post-War, both holding trauma from their past, feeling ashamed and guilty because of it.

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