

## **The Metamorphosis Of Identity: A Reading Of Hanna In “The Reader”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper examines Stephen Daldry’s Hollywood movie “The Reader” (2008), which is set against the backdrop of Holocaust. World War II is one of the traumatising incidents in world history. The Holocaust, also known as Shoah, refers to the mass genocide of the Jews of Europe between 1941 and 1945 across several German occupied provinces of Europe. This has been a part of the ethnic cleansing process. It has been difficult for the victims to recover from the harrowing experience of holocaust. While a few lived with the survivor’s guilt, another group remained unaware of their victimhood. The study focuses on the metamorphosis of the identity of Hanna who plays the dual role of the victim and victimiser in “The Reader”.

**Keywords :** Holocaust, survivor guilt, metamorphosis, identity, victim, victimiser.

### **Introduction**

The plight of women has always been one of the substantial areas of discussion in the European Holocaust narratives. The experiences of women during the war was diverse; they had been victims of tortures in the ghettos. The role of women in the war can be observed through a wide scope of visual culture that includes photographs, propaganda and postcards portraying multiple dimensions of female persona during the Second World War. The people carried the physical and mental scars of the war for a long time. The war aids had to face the accusations and punishments for the activities they were forced to do as part of their duty during the war. The victims struggled to overcome the traumatic experiences of the holocaust. Sustenance of life and reconstruction of identity has been a Herculean task for the survivors.

Women aids were considered second line of defence during the war. A few survivors voiced their stories, memories and experiences of the cruelty in testimonials, diaries, essays, fictional renditions and even in videos while others opted to remain silent. The survivors, victims and perpetrators have variant experiences of holocaust. “The Reader” narrates the story of Hanna, a war aid through the memories of a melancholic German lawyer Michael who as a teenager had a romantic encounter with her. The character of Hanna is built through a series of events in her life including her relationship with Michael, the guards’ trial, and the events that occur after the trial.

### **Objective**

The paper focuses on the metamorphosis of identity of Hanna, a survivor and a perpetrator as being portrayed in the movie “The Reader”. Hanna does not regret her actions during the war as she believes that she has been doing her duty. She struggles to come in terms with the psychological implications of the Second World War. The story is a bleak portrayal of souls dealing with the aftermath of Holocaust and Stalinism.

### **Hypothesis**

“The Reader” is a movie with multiple implications which could be analysed from the reconstruction of identity through psychoanalytic reading of the female character named Hanna Schmitz in the late fifties backdrop. It is a story about coming to terms with one generation’s sins as well as truth and reconciliation.

## Research Methodology

The study is executed on a qualitative method. The research is conducted on the basis of a close reading and analysis of the primary and the secondary sources. The character of Hanna was analysed from a psychoanalytic perspective in-depth using materials on holocaust movies, survivors, socio-political background etc. Psychological analysis was done to understand the character by placing the character in the historical backdrop of the time of post-world war and years after it. The subordinate characters and their relation to protagonist was also analysed.

## Analysis and Major Findings

“The Reader”, a movie set in Berlin of 1955, is about Hanna an SS guard in the concentration camps of Auschwitz during the Second World War. *Der Vorleser*, a German novel by Bernhard Schlink, was the inspiration for Stephen Daldry’s 2008 film. It narrates the complex story of the journey of Hanna from a seductive middle aged lady to a war criminal and portrays her romantic and sexual encounters with Michael, a teenage German boy.

These confrontations tend to change Michael’s perspectives about life and future. The movie exhibits Hanna’s struggle in grappling with her past sins as seen through the eyes of the protagonist Michael.

The movie starts with Michael recollecting his teenage days when he meets a sturdy woman twice his age named Hanna. She works as a tram conductor in West Germany and chances upon Michael and assists him in cleaning up after he becomes ill on the street. She consoles him like a mother and she addresses him ‘kid’. Hanna showers him with affection and ensures that he gets home safe. After a long recuperation Michael visits to thank his benefactor. He recognises her as a simple woman who lives in a run-down neighbourhood, is lonely and leads a life characterised by hard work. The motherly affection before gets replaced by sexual attraction when Hanna send him to bath and when she tries to catch a glimpse of the young boy’s naked body after he helps her to carry sooty coal to her apartment. Ingrid Lewis in her book *Women in European Holocaust Films* states that the buckets of coal emphasise ‘the “heaviness” of her life. Through their relationship Michael tries to discover sexual intimacy as a teenage boy while Hanna discovers her suppressed desires for a human presence in her life as she is a character who generally keeps to herself. Hanna’s age lead to her having a dominance over Michael who is more or less a submissive to her as it is she who leads him through their sexual relation. Even after becoming romantically involved she continues to address him as kid which shows that deep within her psyche she realises the fact that he is under aged for the pleasures they were involved in. Michael sees Hanna as a passionate lover with a special interest in books and her life revolves around her profession and housekeeping chores. The secrecy surrounding the identity is Hanna is evident from the way she thwarts the question of Michael regarding her name. Realising her love for literature Michael offers her books to read and she denies them saying that she would rather love to listen to him reading. She lavishes praises on his narrative ability and Michael feels validated. Despite the fact that she addresses him as "Kid", there is a kind of role reversal in his reading to her that allows him to introduce her to worlds she was previously unaware of. When Michael confronts Hanna about the public ignoring and tells that he didn’t do anything thinking of upsetting her she replies, “You don’t have the power to upset me .You don’t matter enough to upset me”, which speaks volumes about the power relation she is caught in throughout her life. Even though Michael wants to go public about their love affair the manner in which the world sees their relation is evident in the scene where the restaurant owner they meet during the cycling trip mistakes them as mother and son. A switch in the role of Hanna in Michael’s life from mother to a passionate lover heightened here. In a scene where they end up in an old country church, she becomes

emotionally overwhelmed on listening to children's choir showing how simple things touch her deeply. But later we learn that she was crying because she was responsible for the deaths of women and children in another church.

Hanna being dedicated and excellent in her job gets promoted to work in the office instead of being a ticket collector. But she is left in a confused state whether to take up the job being offered or to live her life in the presence of Michael. She realises that their relationship might never get accepted in the society and that she might end up losing the only human presence in her life. This psychological trauma that she was under might have triggered her to slap Michael. Not knowing about Hanna's mental state Michael lashes out on Hanna about she being dominating and unconcerned. Hanna feeling apologetic cleans him up. Hanna plays the role of both a mother and a lover to Michael. These scenes demonstrate the maternal care she showers on the boy. Thus, a switch in identity happens here. Hanna suddenly ends their relationship without notice, leaving young Michael heartbroken and perplexed.

Michael is shocked to hear Hanna's name again almost a decade later, when attending a court-martial of six woman guards who were a part of the Auschwitz concentration camp as a student of Law. It is here that Hanna's mysterious past gets revealed. Hanna is accused of being a part of mass murder of prisoners in a burning church. Unlike the other defendants Hanna is attentive throughout the proceedings and listens attentively to each testimony and evidences produced. She never denies her actions in the selection process and being truthful about everything she is surprised when the others deny something that they actually did. Hanna admits that she was aware of what happened to the selected people but it is evident that she didn't regret on her actions and she believed that she was only doing her duty. She was more concerned about her duty as a guard than saving the lives of prisoners. For her it was just a job essential for her livelihood. That is the reason why she counter questions the judge what he would have done in her situation which remains unanswered. Hanna tries to justify their actions saying what they did was their duty and she believed that anyone in her position would do the same. No amount of remorse is seen on her face for what she did instead she portrays desperation to prove her point which is seen in the manner in which she slams her hand on the bench during the argument. Hanna's illiteracy makes her vulnerable to manipulation, which may explain her. Since she didn't know any better, she joined the SS in the fall of 1943. Miss Marta the author-survivor talks about the humanitarian concern she exhibited towards young girls in the camp. They thought she was using them but found out that she was making them read to her. Hanna takes up all the charges of writing the mendacious SS report since disproving it would require submitting a handwriting specimen and she being ashamed of her illiteracy just takes the responsibility for having written a false SS report, and therefore been the guards' ringleader. Because of the environment generated by the Nazis, she belongs to a generation of Germans generation for whom revealing the brutalities committed against the Jews is far more comfortable and well embraced by all than revealing one's personal flaws. Hanna lowers her head for the first time during the court proceedings not because she is ashamed of her crime but rather on the thought that the world might have known about her illiteracy if she had not admitted the charges. Before the final verdict Hanna scrubs herself clean which might be an attempt to scrub away all the accusations and the shame of being an illiterate. The shouts of accusation and being addressed a 'Nazi whore' disturbs Hanna.

Even though Michael remains silent about Hanna's illiteracy and of the fact that sharing this knowledge may have changed the verdict to a more lenient one, he decides to accompany her on her literacy journey by documenting the books and sending her the tapes to jail. Hanna's smile when she hears the voice is indicative of her renewed hopes and the dreams of light in the dark prison life. She leads a systematic life even in the prison, spends

hours listening to the voice and even borrows book from the prison library as a part of her attempt to read. Hanna writes Michael a letter to show her gratitude and still addresses him as kid. Michael not responding to any of her letters frustrates and confuses her. The manner in which she signs her name and holds the pen is entirely different from how she used to do it before indicating her progress. The demanding nature is still in her character which is visible in the way she in her letters says, "Write to me kid".

Her encounter with Michael as she was about to be released for her good behaviour demonstrates how she has dealt with her remorse after spending two decades in penitentiary. Hanna is nervous about her appearance in front of the man that she is in love with but his behaviour and mannerisms towards her makes her realise the distance between them and actually how far she is from reconciling with the 'kid'. When Michael enquires about her thoughts on the past, Hanna misunderstands the enquiry to be about their past relationship. She adds that prior to the trial she had under no circumstances even thought about her former life and boldly says that "it doesn't matter what I feel, think. Dead are still dead". Her ironic response and refusal to discuss her past demonstrates that she has never felt guilty and still believes herself to be just. It also demonstrates her inability to consider her previous wrongdoings. Michael had expected the prison life to change her attitude. She commits suicide on the eve of her release. Hanna bequeaths her life savings to one of the survivors of the church fire which is to be handed over by 'Michael Berg'. This is the first time Hanna uses his name instead of addressing him as kid. It shows her acceptance of the distance between them. Her last act discloses how much time she must have spent thinking about her crimes and the weight of remorse on her shoulders. By giving her entire life savings to the survivor, Hanna attempts to repent her actions. Ilana, the survivor, rejects the gift as it might give her absolution which she isn't ready to grand. But she does accept the battered old tea tin as it resembled the one she lost in the camp with which she had a sentimental connection. This gesture can be taken up as a gesture of forgiveness to some extent. Michael takes his daughter to Hanna's grave and tells her the tale of his first love at the end of the film.

## Conclusion

The film's dramatic and emotional framework portrays Hanna's hidden suffering as a form of victimhood that, while not identical to that of her prisoners, is definitely something to be considered, and to see a guiltless human vulnerability at the root of war crimes. Hanna's character is built in such a way that it breaks the monster stereotype and emphasises the aspect of a more ordinary and human image of a female perpetrator. The plot ostensibly weaves together educational and sexual cycles. For Hanna, meeting Michael is the initiation of an educational process while for Michael, their relationship is an oedipal drama. Hanna and Michael are unconcerned about the affair; he is too enamoured with her to respond morally, and she is unaware of her manipulation of him. Even though a matured lady Hanna falls into an illicit relation with a young boy who is of the age where logical thinking is way off the limits. Hanna crying when the two end up at a church where children sang hymns later reveals to be tears of guilt for what she had done. Hanna is a character struggling to come in terms with her past action for whom illiteracy seems to be more shameful than accepting the accusation of being a part of mass murder program initiated by Germans. Her preference of accepting the Jew murderer role than tell the world about her illiteracy makes Michael realise that Hanna believes her illiteracy is worse than her Nazi past which if revealed could help her in the trial by helping her win the justice she deserves. Michael is conflicted as he wants to help Hanna, yet is repulsed by what she did. Though he still loves Hanna, all that he can bring himself to do is become her reader again, reciting books onto cassette tapes and send them to her in prison. Michael could be taken as the last victim of Hanna, the post-war equivalent of the long list of children doomed to read to her behind barbed wire. Hanna's age had given her an advantage over Michael in their former relationship, resulting in his subordination but her age has now become a measure of her loss of control, and also of the

impossibility of crossing the divide between the two. Never does Hanna reach the state of being a full citizen. She remains deficient and hence is never completely responsible for her actions. Her suicide explains her acknowledgment of the fact that some perceive her as a criminal and that Michael would never forgive her, there might also be an empathic remorse. Hanna leaving what money she had saved during her days to a survivor of Holocaust could be taken as a way in which she is trying to repent for her sin. During her trial the protesters asks her why she didn't kill herself which she eventually does after converting her biggest shame into success i.e. learning to read and write.

The film switches between present and past time periods and is structured on several time frames. The film emphasises the idea that all German women are victims and Hanna was a victim because of her low socioeconomic status and her lack of ability to read. According to Ingrid Lewis, "The film marks a transition in the representation of women as perpetrators of the Nazi regime, from absent images or rigidly anchored stereotypes of female evil to portrayals that explore the complexity of ordinary women who actively contributed to the persecution". The film is regarded as a didactic example of how to resist conformist moral thinking: a perpetrator's background story may turn out to be nuanced and even tragic, while, unexpectedly, a victim may turn out to be, in a certain way, blameworthy.

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