Kurdish Studies
January 2016
Volume: 04, No: 1, pp 127-130
ISSN: 2051-4883 (Print) | ISSN 2051-4891 (Online)
www.KurdishStudies.net

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v4i1.3804

Understanding Agency: Crime and Culpability in *The Reader* (2008) and *The White Ribbon* (2009)

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Abstract: This paper critically analyses two films – the 2008 film *The Reader* directed by Michael Haneke and *The White Ribbon*, released in 2009, directed by Stephen Daldry. Both films posit the question of locating the agency of a crime. Both films are based in Germany but the story of *The White Ribbon* precedes that of *The Reader* by some three decades. They are both tales of decadence that overpowers a society to the extent that it indulges into violence against its own residents. *The White Ribbon* features occasions of unexpected heinous crimes committed against the children of a fictional German village while *The Reader* presents the trial of an ex-SS guard Hannah Schmidt who is being tried for participating in the Holocaust. Both occasions present a historical setting where crimes have been committed in the hindsight and therefore the pursuers of the dramatic narrative are largely oblivious of the extent to which culpability can be associated with the subject or subjects towards whom the agency of the crime is allegedly directed. The question of culpability therefore becomes an object of introspection more visibly in *The Reader* and a little subtly in *The White Ribbon*. The question demands probing the socio-historical circumstances in order to rightly adjudicate the agency of crime that the two narratives pose.

Keywords: Crime, Agency, Holocaust, Guilt, *The Reader*(2008), *The White Ribbon*(2009)

The issue of identifying the agency of a crime is raised in the 2008 Michael Haneke film The Reader and the 2009 Stephen Daldry film The White Ribbon. Although both movies are set in Germany, The White Ribbon's tale takes place about thirty years before The Reader's. In both cases, a society is so overcome by decadence that it resorts to violence against its own citizens. In The Reader, Hannah Schmidt, an ex-SS guard, stands on trial for her involvement in the Holocaust, while The White Ribbon depicts instances of sudden, horrific atrocities against the children of a fictional German community. Both incidents offer a historical context in which crimes have been committed in retrospect, so those pursuing the dramatic narrative are largely unaware of the degree to which the subject or subjects that the crime is allegedly directed towards can be held accountable. Thus, the issue of responsibility becomes a subject of reflection more overtly in The Reader and somewhat more covertly in The White Ribbon. To properly judge the agency of crime that the two tales pose, the question necessitates examining the socio-historical context.

The trial of the SS guards in *The Reader* acquires particular dimension in this debate to adjudge the agent of the sinister crimes because the manner of her trial in the film reflects the desperation of a society that eagerly aspires to rid itself from the recollections of the Holocaust and consequently the guilt of having been a witness to such despairing acts of violence and therefore the urgency to pin the guilt over the convicts can be easily located. The villagers in *The White Ribbon* on the other hand choose to quietly ignore the crimes when it is forced to confront its methodology.

Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* narrates the story of a German village before the First World War that is shaken by the sudden surge in horrific crimes committed against its children, women and decrepit. These crimes follow the pattern of a ritual punishment but the society at large represented primarily by the Pastor and the Baron remains blind to notice this pattern. One of the reasons that could be attributed to this willful blindness is the unwillingness of this society to identify the fatal malaise that it is suffering from. The state of the moral decrepitude that has swept passed this village gets represented in its children who are now the torch bearers of its pathological morality. Though Haneke refuses to directly pin culpability on any of the characters who are a part of the narrative but nevertheless he offers subtle hints throughout the film to identify that the village children are involved in the perpetration of these crimes.

The manner of the crimes imitates the form of symbolic punishment that Michel Foucault talks about in Discipline and Punish. It can be argued that they represent an appropriated form of the punishment that was carried out in the streets of 18th century France, the form that Foucault calls Spectacle. He explains the spectacle as a kind of symbolic punishment that served the purpose of not only forcing the tyranny of the State over the alleged culprits but also the audience. The agency of the state has been appropriated by the children of the fictional German village in *The White Ribbon* and therefore the ritual punishment may as well be interpreted as their first step towards subverting the power relations in the society. This can also be interpreted as a form of precipitation of their anger against the social order where they have to experience victimization specifically at the hands of their fathers in the form of sexual repression, exploitation and physical violence. The punishment that the victimized children are subjected to reflects the intent of indirect retribution for the perpetrators. For example, when the Midwife's brutally assaulted son is spotted in the woods, the villagers come across a message left by the violators mentioning "For I , the

Lord, your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation." This can be assessed as a substantial reflection of the motivation behind the series of violence that the village had to encounter. Crime gets manifested in *The White Ribbon* in different dimensions. The crime that the children of the village are subjected to in the form of a ruthless educational system, followed by a rigid religious code that attempts to repress sexuality while simultaneously blinding itself to the sexual crimes that the marginalized were subjected to. The punitive social structure in turn results into the formation of a latent discontent among the children and thereby induces them to practice violence in order to counter it. Another reason behind the evolution of this pathological consciousness is the fact that the children could see through the sanctimonious behavior of their parents and other social guardians. And therefore, the pretense of morality on their part fails to impress them. As a result, they not only appropriate the abuse that they are subjected to but in fact they perpetrate it with renewed intensity with added layers of malice and contempt. Another aspect that distinguishes the two kinds of violence in the film is its location. The former kind of violence remains confined to the precincts of the household on the other hand the latter primarily gets manifested outside. So, there is gradual shift in the locus of crime from the private to the public. This replicates the model of interpretation that seeks to read *The White Ribbon* as preempting the events of the Holocaust that occurred some three decades after the strange acts of violence that affected this fictional German village. There is an underlying impulse in the narrative of the film that seeks to associate the evolution of fascism with certain socio-historical developments. And as Haneke argues in his interviews post the release of the film that his primary concern is to trace the germination of the seeds of fascism with relation to the social and historical conditioning that the subjects of any historical society might be subjected to. But despite his insistence on denying the existence of any direct relationship between *The White Ribbon* and the era of Nazism, one is predisposed to make such associations particularly in the light of the opening remarks of the film's voice-over narrator that his story might "clarify some things that happened later in our country." This is an undeniable attempt made by the filmmaker to persuade *The Reader*s to try and associate the events of the German village with the anti-Semitic crimes of the Third Reich. The geographical and historical setting of the film also echoes the same sentiment. Roy Grundmann argues that "In *The White Ribbon,* the Third Reich is the not-too-distant future that the film never names but alludes to with rhetorical force. But this also becomes the vexing tension in the film – its attempt to showcase something typically, perhaps essentially, German and its simultaneous refusal to identify this essence as a manifest destiny." (Grundmann 8) Haneke tries to explain the ambiguous nature of the narrative by suggesting that unlike other medium of arts such as music or paintings, film by virtue of its form denies the viewer the agency to form his or her own interpretation and therefore through the medium of undisclosed gaps in the narrative he tries to return to the viewers the agency of forming interpretations. He rues the fact "the language-bound arts already circumscribe this freedom considerably, because they are forced to name things by their name. But what is named by its name is artistically dead, has stopped breathing and can only be recycled in discussions." (Grundmann 13) Therefore to restore the freedom of the viewers Haneke indulges into open-ended narratives but as previously mentioned the director nevertheless provides surplus information within the narrative of *The White Ribbon* to help or persuade the viewers to identify the culprits. The question that however remains unanswered in the film is the extent to which culpability can either be associated with the village children or the Patriarchal figures. Pinning the guilt over either of the two agencies involves serious risks of mistakes. The rigorous combination of discipline, authority and education may be considered one of the causes that trigger the violent behavior in the children. And the near fatal realization that their educators and disciplinarians were themselves far from practicing those virtues that they preached leaves a moral vacuum in the children and therefore making them easy prey to any kind of ideological indoctrination. As Haneke mentions that "What's decisive here…is that I depict conditions that have to be in place for people to be receptive to ideology, be willing to clutch at any straw whatever that will allow them to get out of the extremely difficult situation they're in. that's usually ideology. It can be right- or- left wing. It can be religious or political. The Nazi example is simply one among others. And I hope the film doesn't restrict itself to that example." (Klawans 2)

The White Ribbon represents a village community that is dominated by "malice, envy and brutality" as the Baron's wife claims towards the end of the film, a dystopian setting where social rubric is under threat not only from internal factors but also by the fear of external aggression in the form of the declaration of World War I. Its encounter with strange acts of persecution will appear mild when compared with the catastrophic violence that will be directed against the European Jews in the next three decades in the Third Reich. But the process of introspection that follows the Holocaust will share similar contours as represented in *The White Ribbon*. A society that upholds violence as a form of retribution against violence will become the common subject in this analysis of locating the agency of crime and understanding the ensuing punishment. In Stephen Daldry's *The Reader*, the act of being complicit into a crime and the extent of measuring culpability on the basis of this complicity becomes the object of analysis, both for the characters within the dramatic narrative as well as for the audience. The question of education is also of some relevance here as the SS guard Hannah Schmitz who is accused of aiding and abetting the murder of 300 Jews at one of the concentration camps in Auschwitz, is illiterate and the narrative informs that one of the primary objectives behind her resignation from the tram company and enrollment at SS was her underlying inclination to conceal the shame of her illiteracy. Though it appears to be a problematic explanation but considering that every subject in the Third Reich whether by complying with the official directives of anti-Semitism or by enlisting in the State agencies involved in the Holocaust or by offering no active resistance against the genocide was directly or indirectly involved in the Holocaust. Hannah Schmitz also shares this collective culpability along with other characters in *The Reader*. But owing to her special position as a prison guard when the Church where the Jews were kept prisoners , was hit by a bomb during an air raid by enemy forces, and her decision not to open the gates of the Church even when faced with the imminent death of the prisoners puts her again into a special category of war criminals and therefore it becomes both interesting as well as problematic to understand the extent to which the agency of the alleged crimes can be traced to her.

Stephen Daldry's *The Reader* (2008) is based upon the German novel – *The Reader* (1995) by Bernhard Schlink. While *The White Ribbon* engages with the Holocaust through only indirect references, *The Reader* (2007) on the other hand is more actively

engaged with it. It attempts to address questions of moral and legal culpability through the figure of the German SS guard – Hannah Schmitz. The narrative is structured in a manner where the actions and the ensuing trial of Hannah are reproduced through the recollections of the narrator who shared a romantic and sexual association with her in the past during his adolescence. The conflict that the narrator undergoes while attempting to understand Hannah's actions can be seen as a symbolic rendering of the trauma that the generation of Germans following the Holocaust had to experience while attempting to understand the behavior of their predecessors.

Hannah's character is significant towards our understanding of the complicity of common Germans in the Nazi enterprise but at the same time the decision pertaining to her culpability becomes problematic when addressed from the perspective of the available agency. The ridiculous manner in which she is tried at the German court shares some familiarity with the trial of Adolf Eichmann at Jerusalem as noted by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann at Jerusalem* (1963). Daldry, too, like Arendt tries to engage with the question of culpability and like Eichmann, his female protagonist also tries to absolve herself from the guilt of transporting Jews to the gas chambers by invoking the directives that she received from her superiors and by citing obligation towards her duty. But, unlike Eichmann, who enjoyed a higher position within the Nazi state apparatus with some executive power ranging from emigration to deportation, Hannah, on the contrary, has been vested with very little power and therefore during her trial, she raises a very important question for the presiding judge that is - what she would have done, had she been in her position? The judge of course can only provide a rhetorical answer.

The representation of people complicit in the perpetration of one of modern history's most gruesome crimes as everyday figures who are both perpetrators as well as victims can also be understood in terms of relocating the agency of the moral culpability from individual figures to the society at large. Arendt's description of the mechanism through which Hitler could actually attain such large-scale success in terms of exterminating the Jewish population is shocking in terms of the social complicity that she is able to establish during the course of her legal and historical narrative. The Jews could be effectively and seamlessly delivered to their funeral grounds through the help of not only the German population at large but also by engaging a selected number of Jews who not only worked as guards but also administered the machines at the gassing centres, with the hope that they might be spared the extermination as a reward of their cooperation - which eventually turned to be a fallacy. By pointing towards this collective responsibility, Arendt is not necessarily trying to excuse the individual agency, but possibly highlights the malaise that modern judiciary suffers from where by making an example out of an individual culprit the society attempts to heal the wounded collective consciousness and thereby fails or refuses to address the more uncomfortable questions that it faces.

In the case of Otto Eichmann who was kidnapped by Israeli forces in Argentina and deported to Israel to face charges for facilitating the Holocaust, Arendt's observation that unlike the psychopathic disposition which is usually associated with mass murderers, Eichmann was not only ordinary but also deprived of any significant amount of intelligence. And therefore, she makes the conjecture that under certain circumstances even ordinary people may become participants in deeds of extraordinary violence. The defense that Eichmann produced with regards to his complicity with the Nazi crimes mentioned that he was only following the orders of his superiors and functioning according to the law of the Third Reich and that he lacked any executive power to either order an execution or to get one stopped. His actions were devoid of any personal identification with the Final Solution and therefore lacked any intent to murder. Arendt portrayal of Eichmann finds a certain semblance in the character of Hannah in *The Reader* though with a few exceptions. Hannah's trial also reflects the desperation of the State and the populace at large to vindicate itself from the shame of being complicit in the Nazi crimes by punishing the relatively low-key members of the Nazi establishment. The disgust with which the audience lashes out at the defendants on the day of the judgment in the trial scene of *The Reader* by calling the defendants "Nazi whores" reflects their eagerness to vindicate themselves. Hannah's act of accepting the responsibility as being the decision maker in choosing not to open the Church gate in a bid to conceal the shame of her illiteracy also assumes significance with the narrative. However, it is not difficult to ascertain that she is more ashamed of her illiteracy as compared to her association with the Nazi establishment. Also, it is important to notice that unlike Eichmann who joined the SS out of his ambition, Hannah's only reason for opting for the job was her adamancy to conceal her illiteracy and to sustain herself financially. Though her decisions are not beyond reproach but nevertheless her character has been sympathetically treated by Schlink as well as Daldry.

Hannah's relationship with Michael further problematizes the ability of the viewers to measure the extent of her culpability. The dramatic narrative in the film largely consists of Michael's recollections and owing to his romantic association with Hannah in the past, one may doubt the objectivity of his recollections. However, the manner in which Michael banishes Hannah from his life owing to her association with the Nazis, by deciding not to meet her or to defend her or to answer her written letters serves the purpose of a symbolic chastisement that he consciously or unconsciously bestows upon her. Though he sends her the audio tapes of various books but nevertheless he deprives her of his personal acquaintance. The final meeting of Hannah and Michael assumes significance in the light of Hannah's disappointment regarding any hopes that she might have harbored about being given a final absolution from the crimes of her past after having served a prison sentence of 20 years when she is questioned by Michael about her reflections on the past and whether she has learned anything from her past. She replies by saying that "It does not matter what I feel. It does not matter what I think. The dead are still dead." This also reveals the uncertainties that Michael has always had about Hannah when he quips that "I wasn't sure what you had learned." He therefore remains incapable to understand her struggle and she in turn realizes that her punishment does not end with the prison term but with her life. Therefore, in order to redeem herself from the scrutiny of the outside world, particularly Michael her only acquaintance in the outside world, she kills herself.

Hannah's death leaves certain questions that also find a resonance in *The White Ribbon*. The most relevant of them is the issue of social chastisement as a form of punishment which is only an appropriated form of the "spectacle." (Foucault 32) Punishment; in *The White Ribbon* in the form of the white ribbons that are tied on the arms of the children of the Pastor in order to remind them about innocence and purity, which they once had and the expectation that this act of public shaming

will perhaps restore them to their post-lapsarian state; its manifestation in *The Reader* in the form of life imprisonment to Hannah to seek retribution for the millions of dead Jews, reflects the political technology of the body (Foucault 26) exercised by the Father figure in *The White Ribbon* and the State in *The Reader* whereby punishing the deviants become a form of restoring the power of the authoritative figure. This idea of retribution has its origin in the medieval era as Foucault notes that "Besides its immediate victim, the crime attacks the sovereign: it attacks him personally, since the law represents the will of the sovereign; it attacks him physically, since the force of the law is the force of the prince…the intervention of the sovereign is not, therefore, an arbitration between two adversaries; it is much more, even, than an action to enforce respect for the rights of the individual; it is a direct reply to the person who has offended him." Foucault 47-8) Therefore an act of crime becomes an act that violates the authority and thus it becomes imperative to punish either the culprit or in the event that the culprit is beyond the reach of the authority then a ritual punishment must be exercised. So as already argued the occasion of crime necessarily breeds the occasion of punishment and what is significant here is that the location of agency is not the primary concern of the authority. As it happens in *The White Ribbon* where the "iniquities of the fathers are visited upon the children". Similarly, the punishment of Hannah also echoes the sentiment of misplaced culpability because as Hannah Arendt mentions that the Final Solution would not have been successful if it did not get the support of the Germans including the "Judenrate" the Jewish leadership councils that cooperated with the Nazis by compiling list of people, addresses and property and by helping in administering the ghettos. (Arendt) Thus the process of ascertaining culpability within the two films in question here becomes an extremely problematic enterprise and if at all agency has to be located it will certainly not be associated with those who get punished.

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