
After a best-selling novel, an author, more often than not, disappoints his readers with his other novels merely because of high expectations. Readers as well as critics tend to draw parallels with the first best seller. Bernhard Schlink’s case is no different. The expectations from a novelist who has authored a mega best-selling novel, *The Reader*, are massive. However, since a different theme may require an altogether different treatment, it seems justified that one examines a novel in isolation. Schlink is largely successful in giving different dimensions to the canvas that he has painted with his consummate skills. Schlink does not leave his readers passive. *The Weekend* is important, as it is one of the few novels that offer an insight into the life of a terrorist. It is interesting to see what goes into making such a terrorist. Jörg, the protagonist, grew up without a mother and is shown to have had childhood fantasies of being a hero. His romantic view of the world and fascination with change is remarkable. Schlink belongs to the same generation as the Red Army revolutionaries. Thus, he seems to be qualified for rendering such a character. However, the character of Jörg could have been explored to a greater extent to depict what is within, what demonic instincts drive such characters, and what stuff they are made up of. The novelist has dealt with the challenges that a former terrorist faces in an effort to lead a normal life. The fact that he is seen as undesirable even by his own son is a telling example of how the world looks at senseless violence. Thus, the novel’s depiction of this character is important for the contemporary world facing peace issues.

The novel opens with Christiane having set a stage to welcome her brother, Jörg, an ex-terrorist having been pardoned after 24 years of imprisonment, with his old friends on a weekend at a dilapidated eighteenth century country house. While escorting him to the house in Brandenburg, Christiane’s fear about her brother being able to drive the car on the roads after so many years draws a parallel with her apprehension about him being absorbed into society all over again. *The Weekend* is a story of sin and expiation and of the dead wood of the past which Jörg has to live with. The weekenders join him ‘out of curiosity’ (8) to dig out a few unanswered questions and also to listen to his experiences as a terrorist and a prisoner. With Jörg and his sister, the list of attendees includes a cleric, a lawyer, a journalist, a dental technician, various spouses, their children and Margarete who, though not directly connected to Jörg, somehow muddles herself in the group particularly with Henner, the journalist. These characters, though seemingly not arresting the reader’s attention, in fact, merit deep analysis when they are viewed in perspective. They behave the way they do in an atmosphere burdened with unease and emotional tumult. Their portrayal induces the reader to reflect on how to deal with such a scenario. This is, perhaps, a useful insight in dealing with rehabilitating perpetrators. This aspect in the novel is significant in a world where terrorists who have abjured violence are tempted to go back to their world because of how the society deals with them and makes the civil space for them as exile. In Dorle, the dental technician’s daughter, the novelist has presented a fascinating character who tries to engineer an adventurous sex exploit with the former terrorist, Jörg and after having failed in her attempt she satisfies her somewhat perverted obsession with
Jörg’s son Ferdinand. Her presence in the novel gives a sense of completeness to the society portrayed.

Jörg shifts splendidly between the moods. In the course of the novel, he is skeptical, frightened, arrogant, betrayed, violent and hurt. Jörg is now a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man. Scarcely able to bring himself to touch any of the weekenders other than his ever-doting sister, Jörg displays a willingness to be a part of the world that he had left long before. The shift from an ultra adventurous life as a member of Rote Armee Fraktion to a sedated dullness as a quelled prisoner is pathetic. He had severed all social contacts in all these years. Thus the question of how to be reintegrated into society baffles Jörg as well as his sister. Christiane, who has once taken an unexpected step in having her brother’s arrest choreographed, now strives to provide a life of dignity to her brother to whom she has been sister-cum-mother. His attempt to be accepted again into the mainstream of society after having been ostracised as a terrorist is a strange situation for which his sister makes extraordinary efforts. Schlink’s craftsmanship creates space both for Jörg’s willingness to be blended into the society and his unchanged political inclinations. Jörg, a trampled terrorist trying to remould his life, is an exciting character. He demonstrates readiness to divorce his past reckless life and marry a new life of dignity. Schlink deliberately delineates Jörg’s character somewhere between good and bad to make him look more earthly and real. Jörg is painted as a man wrong for right reasons.

Germans have a troubled past that parades in their present. In the words of Jörg: ‘We had to fight. Our parents conformed and shirked resistance – we couldn’t repeat that’ (192). So they have to walk extra miles to prove themselves. In the 1970s, the ultra leftists fought a war for the Palestinians, the Vietnamese, and for the oppressed and persecuted mainly against American imperialists and Israeli Jews. They had to repeal history by fighting for a just cause. They slipped into an enterprise that never proved productive. The comrades were fossilised, left staggered and subdued. With them, their version of history, their interpretation of events and their outlook, too, failed to get the expression as they deserved. For a reader who adheres to the idea that the truth of history is contained more in literature than in history itself and wants to excavate the history of Germany in the volatile 1970s, the novel offers a different perspective and shows how the revolutionaries looked at the world.

Marko, the over-enthusiastic and insubstantial comrade, who, with his unimpressive and incoherent rhetoric, persuades Jörg to rejoin the struggle by forging a communion with another terrorist group, al-Qaeda, fails to rekindle the fire in Jörg’s dormant zeal. Jörg’s own declaration of his longing for settling down with a decent job and be woven into the fabric called civil society strikes a blow to Marko’s crusade against the authoritarian system.

The real battle comes with Jörg’s estranged son, Ferdinand, who initially dupes the weekenders by posing as an architectural historian. The questions he darts at his father remain unanswered till the end of the novel. He accuses Jörg of domestic crimes and seeks his explanation for the killing of innocent people. He wants him to repent for his dreadful crimes. He finds these sins inexcusable. Even though the state has pardoned Jörg’s crime, he never does. In his defence, Jörg projects himself as a man more sinned against than sinning. But his arguments fail to extract sympathy from his son. Jörg even falls short of justifying his stance in view of Dorle’s

reservation: ‘Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity’ (145). Jörg puts up a brave front by propounding the idea: ‘Resistance against a system of violence is impossible without violence’ (192), but as he can produce no justification for his crimes he ultimately succumbs to the barrage of questions and is forced to agree that they ‘misused violence’ (192). With his crushed spirits he feels: ‘we took up a struggle that we could not win’ (192).

The problem with the novel is that its tedious lengthy dialogues lack profundity and the arguments are unpersuasive. The problem escalates in the scenes where long oratory skills are displayed. In their surfeit of emblematic detail, they reduce the characters to symbols. The dialogues are play of the binaries of right and wrong, denunciation and justification, personal and social, rights and duties, and secrets and revelations. But through these arguments, the novel offers the perfect rear view of an unsuccessful revolution, now seen as evil. At the same time, it gives an insight into the nature of terrorism in general, which equally concerns today’s world. With its complex ideas and emotions, insights and truths, The Weekend is intelligent and makes an interesting read.

Vivek Kumar Dwivedi