

Philip Kerr's *The Pale Criminal*: A Totalitarian Analysis

Ashok Gajanan Gadekar

At Post: Varne, Tal. Dist. Satara, (MS) India

Prof. (Dr.) Satish Ghatge

Shikshanmaharshi Bapuji Salunkhe College, Karad, Dist. Satara, (MS) India

Abstract

The present research paper aims to analyse and interpret Philip Kerr's second novel of *Bernie Gunther* series *The Pale Criminal* from the perspective of totalitarianism. All the *Bernie Gunther* novels are historical thrillers set before, during and after the Second World War. Each novel of the series depicts the underlying nature of Hitler's Nazi Germany. The protagonist Bernie Gunther is a detective and has served in different departments of the Nazi government like Kripo or police, the SS, the SD and the Army also. Kerr makes him a sarcastic figure who reveals the dehumanising impact of dictatorial government's control over the masses. Kerr's novels are considered as an excellent novels of Nazi totalitarian world.

Key Words: Kerr, totalitarianism, Nazi, Bernie, Hitler, control, suppression

Philip Kerr's novel *The Pale Criminal* was published in 1990. It is set in Berlin in 1938, just before the beginning of the Second World War. *Bernie Gunther* series of historical thrillers by Philip Kerr represents the innate abilities for domination of human beings where individual's life, particularly of those who are not a part of their race, creed, culture or nation becomes unbearable. Mystery, corruption, hypocrisy and conspiracies encompass the totalitarian state. Circumstances lead them to spiritual and social displacement. The novel deals with a series of killings of Aryan women and Bernie Gunther, a private detective is compelled by the General Reinhard Heydrich to join his duties as the *Kripo* (Police criminal) in order to catch the serial killer before the next murder. This novel also touches the suppression of women which is as ruthless

as was the Second World War, mainly during National Socialism.

Totalitarian regime amends law according to the need of the propaganda of the party. The Nazi Party under the leadership of Hitler radically changed the structure and functions of the police and the system of justice. Reality becomes intolerable for the people which they cannot escape from with the loss of individual, social status and communal bonds. Arthur Nebe, the Reichkriminaldirektor exposes his frustration and agony by strongly criticising that he loved the police force and he anticipated that National Socialism would bring law and order than during Weimar years. But he discovers it more corrupt and worse than before. It denotes the inability and weakness of Germans before agnosticism of Himmler and Heydrich. He firmly criticises Heydrich's

fascist behaviour that he obtains what he wants (BN 281-82).

Coercion and total control over media also is recurrent in the novel. The authority in totalitarian government absolutely controls what to be published in the newspaper. Heydrich's statement reveals this when he states Bernie, "The newspapers print what we tell them to print." (326) Bernie has obliged to follow the orders of Heydrich. His denial to solve the murder case given by Heydrich shall become the cause of his loss of his licences of investigation, gun and car. Acceptance and co-operation are the only choices individuals generally have before totalitarian government (328). Bernie symbolises a vigorous opposition to bureaucracy and treat everyone the same either a Jew or Nazi official in the investigation. All the offices in Third Reich have the Führer's photo like Arthur Nebe (377).

Totalitarian regimes are mainly surrounded by tension and strain due to the frequent changes by the government (Linz 69). War is frequently declared as a dominant part by totalitarian state to accomplish the goals and individuals are found forced to witness such dehumanising and terrible events. Hitler, as a totalitarian figure of Nazi Germany took decisions on his own. Kerr has skilfully presented the life of Germans during the Nazi regime in the novel. People in the totalitarian regime have the endless fear and impending doom about war in their mind which Dr. Kalau raises to Bernie, "Is there going to be a war?" and remarks that Hitler's behaviour as 'compulsive or irresistible' (344). The worst dimensions of totalitarian state is presented through Bernie's dialogue with Liza's parents who has been murdered.

They condemn the system for not publishing the news of murders of girls to really aware them of the situation. On the other hand girls are merely warned to be their self-guard through propaganda drives (445). Bernie's reply that he is just obeying orders symbolises the helplessness and inability of a person who really cares for justice before the system.

The police and other security organisations are under the total control of totalitarian figure or the party like Nazi in Germany. Bernie realises the increased number of crimes during the Third Reich where in the morning people frequently confront the Gestapo man knocking on the door (388). In totalitarian states the lives of people become miserable and helpless that they fail to confront such inevitable situations.

Juan Linz points out that coercion and state terror are the fundamental elements of totalitarian state always existing within it (28). The oppression and ruthless behaviour of Nazi leaders have been continuously portrayed in the novel. When Bernie goes to a café in Nuremberg he witnesses the inhuman and evil conduct of Julius Streicher, *the political leader of the Nazi Party ranked as the Gauleiter of Franconia*. He reproaches the waiters for bad service. The waiter reveals the reason to Bernie why do they tolerate him. He answers that he will soon find an excuse to shut the hotel. He also conveys that Streicher recently had appealed people to abolish the synagogue, Jew's place of worship (408-9). Streicher has been involved in crimes like killings, forgery, robbery, rape, corruption, blackmail, prostitution, threatening the people and finishing the professions of truthful and respected ones who have the valour to oppose him. Yet he is free. In totalitarian

state individuals are given ill-treatment and are made to fear than respect the political leaders. The fear of losing something if opposed is experienced living in the minds every time. Kerr has vividly put forth the picture of Nazi era in Germany and the suffering of Germans at the hands of wicked followers of Nazism.

Intrigues are the omnipresent aspect of totalitarian regime. Such intrigues represent the immoral and corrupted dimension of humanity. Kerr has also revealed the spiritual degradation during the Nazi reich. Bernie as a straightforward and unbiased at his job finds the letters at Wiligut Weisthor's home who pretends to be a spiritual mentor and Germany's sage. He tells Hildegard Steininger that her daughter Emmeline has been killed and kept in a rotten old barrel somewhere near the hill by pretending that he has connected himself to her spirit. Through letters Bernie uncovers the plot of the former SS member Wiligut Weisthor, Dr. Lanz Kindermann, a psychotherapist and Heinrich Himmler. They all are SS members and devoted follower of Reichs Führer and his ideology. He discloses the purpose behind the murders of Aryan girls which was only to 'throw blame on to Berlin Jews' (493). The awareness of her daughter's demise makes Hildegard mad and as a result she asks Bernie to hurt her, use her like a rape. The cause behind her suffering is the system and its evil perpetrators. To make the Jews suffer, they killed the girls of their own race, the master race. It is a sign of Nazis where there was no equality between the Aryans and other races. The racial hatred is at the root of Nazism.

In totalitarian regime every person is transformed into a representative or

accomplice willingly or forcefully. To point out how the totalitarian state utilises its power, Aron states that the means of communication, radio, television, press are conveyed and controlled by the authority representatives. All the elements of economy and professions in the regime are politicized (193-94). Kerr points out that in Nazi Germany existence is a type of accomplishment which is tough to sustain. Bernie raises a question the independence and pleasure the Nazis would attain at the cost of the oppression and misery of the Jews. It leads only to more and more degradation (511). Guiltless people like Reinhard Langue is compelled to be an accomplice in performing the devious acts of the murder of Klaus Herring and other Aryan girls by convincing him that it is his duty for his land Germany by Dr. Kindermann. Bernie's observations are significant that it is Nazi Germany, not ancient Athens where civil rights were considered important and for humans (518).

Totalitarian movements are constructed on lies which are related with social and political sphere that is hidden from the people. Such state often aim to create warlike circumstances to obtain the power. As a result darkness, rootlessness and anarchy go on persistent through the totalitarian state. Arendt rightly points out that the systematic lying to the whole world at large scale takes place under the totalitarian rule (414). Lies and confidentiality is frequently depicted in the novel. Dr. Kindermann hides the case history of Weisthor who was mentally unstable for his benefit and also involved Reinhard for the sake of money he has. Weisthor is a hypocrite pretending to be treating the mental illness of SS members and widows suffering from depression using psychotherapy (524).

The central character, Bernie Gunther, frequently shows himself as a strong enemy of the National Socialism where women are deprived of their fundamental rights and forced by the law to live by it. His introduction of Dr. Frau Kalau vom Hofe clearly narrates the place of women in the Nazi totalitarian state:

Gentlemen, I would like to introduce you to Frau Kalau vom Hofe. I said Frau why not allowed to use the title of doctor, although it is, because it is very evident that she is a woman and we all know, don't we, that a woman's place is in the home, producing recruits for the party and preparing dinner for her husband. Actually is a psychotherapist and a recognized expert in that little and unfathomable mystery to which we refer to as the "criminal mind." (Kerr 2010: 285).

During the Third Reich women are forcefully unemployed. They were

restricted to home and duties of taking care of the old. The patriarchal social structure of the Nazis has been represented by Kerr in the novel.

Conclusion:

Philip Kerr's novel *The Pale Criminal* significantly presents the Nazism as a totalitarian state where individuals are deprived of democratic principles. People are forced to be a part inhuman actions. Dehumanisation is practised at all the levels; individual, social and political. People are obligated to follow the orders without resistance like Bernie. Intrigues and suffering of the individuals also surround the totalitarian regimes. Secrecy and lies are also the underlying elements of Nazi Germany. Kerr has significantly depicted the Nazi world being a totalitarian state and outcomes when the masses choose the wrong adamant leaders for the country like Hitler in Germany.

Works Cited:

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The World Publishing Company, 1962.
- , *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace, 1985, 3 vols.
- Aron, Raymond. *Democracy and Totalitarianism*. Translated by Valence Ionescu, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968.
- Kerr, Philip. *Berlin Noir*. Penguin Books, 2012.
- . *Berlin Trilogy*. RBA: 2010.
- Linz, J. Juan. *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.