

# Microhistoricism in Schindler's List

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## Abstract

Thomas Keneally is one of Australia's most prolific contemporary writers and an Australian Living Treasure. He is of Irish-Catholic descent and an ex-seminarian. He has contributed immensely to Australian literature and this paper makes a modest attempt to highlight his contribution towards history. Though he has written many novels with historical background, *Schindler's List*, his master piece, which brought him fame and name, snatches the top cadre in exhibiting the nuances of the War and its impact on the society, especially in the life of Oskar Schindler. Reminiscence of the past is something that we all treasure and it is an important concept of this present era, because, we are living in a world devoid of our fruits and significance of the past. We normally tend to forget our past or at times knowingly or unknowingly, we hardly take any measures to probe into the roots of the past. In order to identify ourselves in this world of selfies, whatsapp and facebook, it is best to interpret the past, view the present through the eye-piece of scrutiny and observation for a better future. Though it is difficult to know what is in store for us, and understand who we are, it makes little sense at least to know what process we have undergone to be in our present status. This process of what we have undergone readily paves the way to discover and rediscover ourselves. Micro historicism is a term by which we come to understand the events that are taking place in a particular area or country. This paper analyses the sequence of events that took place during the War and what message it gives to the modern world.

**Keywords:** Historical Approach, Holocaust Literature, Microhistoricism, Reliving History

## 1. Introduction

Reliving history is an important concept of this present era, because, we normally tend to forget our past or at times don't take any measures to dig into the roots of the past. In retrospection, it is understood that our past seems to be fixed, stable and secure and our future is open-ended and obscure. The best way to spot ourselves in this world of change and advancement, is by interpreting the past, viewing the present through the eye-piece of analysis and perception for a better future. Though it is difficult to know what is in store for us, and understand who we are, it makes little sense at least to know what process we have undergone to be in our present status. This process of what we have undergone readily paves the way to discover and rediscover ourselves.

Writing about Turkey and Turkish nationalism in 1929, Tekin Alp praises Kemal Atatuk for emphasizing the role of writing a 'proper' history of the Turkish people. Alp argues that detailed and thorough research has resulted in very specific gains for a true 'Turkish' identity. He goes on to describe the new Turkish identity that emerges from such historical and archaeological researches.

Postcolonialism questions the European construction of native pasts and histories. Postcolonial critics argue that, for the Third World countries, their histories will always be produced by the West, within Western frames. Sally Morgan, an eminent Australian Aboriginal writer says that all history is about the white man, and no one knows what it was like for them. Much content of their history has been lost, and people have been too frightened to say anything and there is a lot of history that they cannot even get at.

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Thomas Keneally, an eminent Australian writer, in his historical novels, depicts all his protagonists at a level higher than we would ever imagine. He rises up his heroes from the ordinary strata of life. The man he highlights is an embodiment of consciousness, strong values, self-esteem, humanism and courage. For Keneally's visionary purpose, he uses these traits of a character that are potent and dominant in his heroes – an irreverence for authority or conformism, a sense of loss and disintegration, the physically grotesque, the process of dehumanization and loss of sanity – as powerful symbols of a spiritual estrangement which leads to existential anguish and search for identity. Though publicly operating within the ideological and social systems, or even representing it officially, he is at odds with its mainstream improvements. Keneally emphasizes the fact that these so called unnoticed and ordinary men emerge as superheroes and extraordinary due to their conflict and tension within them to fight for a noble cause. "By the imagination of the real, historians discern regularities and individualities and give to each in their work the shapes appropriate to time and place, including the time and place of writing" (123)<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Thomas Keneally-As a Historian

Thomas Keneally, a stalwart in writing historical novels, has taken a great challenge of taking the task of exploring the identity of his country through the lens of the social and historical background. It is through the international and historical approach that Keneally tries to convey the nuances of history and its effects. *Schindler's List*, the magnum opus of Keneally, portrays the true story of the pragmatic triumph of good over evil by an unlikely German hero of the holocaust. Set in a German-occupied Poland and Czechoslovakia during World War II, Oskar Schindler, a German factory owner and the protagonist of this text, ends up saving several thousand Jews from almost certain death at the hands of the Nazis. "Oskar had become a minor god of deliverance double-faced-in the Greek manner- as any small god; endowed with all the human vices; many-handed; subtly powerful; capable of bringing gratuitous but secure salvation" (232)<sup>2</sup>.

Our minds must be kept open to digest the fact that history as usually written is quite different from history as usually lived: the historians record the extraordinary because it is interesting and exceptional. Behind the wrath of war and politics, misfortune and poverty, adultery and divorce, murder and suicide, were millions of orderly homes, devoted marriages, men and women, kindly and affectionate, troubled and happy with children.

Even in recorded history we find so many instances of goodness, even of nobility, that we can forgive, thought not forget, the sins. It is the gifts of charity of Schindler that have almost equaled the cruelties of battlefields and persecution.

History, on the other hand, is no antiquarian study; nor is it simply a prelude to what some would think of as our own enlightened state of existence. History does not stress in imposing a pattern of meaning upon the past events. It can be understood as men themselves participating in history have understood it. It is a depiction of the consciousness of particular men grappling with the problems of existence and with the symbols they use to express their understanding of what it means to be human. The drama of humanity consists in man's quest for the truth of order, a truth that has to be nurtured and re-nurtured in the perpetual struggle. It is only through an awareness of existence in untruth that we may be moved to discover the life of the spirit with which to challenge disorder. The past that is depicted should be viewed from two perspectives: its orderliness and the record of the past. History should not be read as an attempt to explore curiosities of a dead past, but as an inquiry into the structure of the order in which we live presently.

The structure of the order is not something men make but something men discover. The plot of *Schindler's List* is structured like a tapestry, with subplots about dozens of Schindlerjuden woven into the main narrative about Schindler. The exposition opens the narrative in medias res in Nazi-occupied Poland during the autumn of 1943. Oskar Schindler, the owner of a booming factory that uses Jewish slave labour, attends a dinner party hosted by Amon Goeth, the sadistic Commandant of a labour camp outside Cracow. "It is certain that by this stage of his history, in spite of his liking for food and wine, Herr Schindler approached tonight's dinner at Commandant Goeth's more with loathing than with anticipation" (15)<sup>2</sup>. Schindler is an unlikely hero: a war profiteer who charms, bribes and cons high-ranking Nazis. "Those who knew Oskar in those years speak of his easy magnetic charm, exercised particularly over women. The face seemed scarcely flawed at all, except that there was a vinous light in the eyes" (19)<sup>2</sup>.

Thomas Keneally vividly brings out the character of Schindler as a Faustian figure with two souls in his breast, genuinely caring, in some sense, about the Jews entrusted in his care, but at the same time driven by economic motives and his desire to succeed as a big businessman. After the war, the Jews saved by Schindler from the Nazis are scattered over the face of the earth among what the 'Author's Note' at the beginning of the book describes as "an account

of Oskar's astonishing history based in the first place on interviews with 50 Schindler survivors from seven nations – Australia, Israel, West Germany, Austria, the United States, Argentina and Brazil” (9)<sup>2</sup> Marion Glastonbury justifies thus: “The joint testimony of these survivors has been tirelessly researched, skillfully assembled, scrupulously checked. The narrative sequence of flashbacks, clues and forecasts mingle suspense and shock with immediacy unattainable through the settled hindsight of history” (233)<sup>3</sup>.

It is through the international and historical approach that Keneally finds a proper answer for his quest for consciousness and his national identity. In an interview with Thomas Keneally, Laurie Hergenhan says,

*Schindler's List*, the masterpiece which made known Thomas Keneally to the entire world, depicts a peculiar form of identity in the hero, brings to the preview the quest for consciousness in him during the period of the holocaust. What Keneally in fact does is force together the two modes—decisive violence and everyday details of life (224)<sup>4</sup>.

Holocaust literature depicts the events of the holocaust through fiction, drama and poetry. Some literature about holocaust is written as historical fiction and thus removed from the actual course of events, and uses allegory and other devices to get its point across. Apart from other literatures' focus on holocaust, the anthology of literature on this theme has appeared immensely in English. “*Schindler's List* is based on the wartime recollections of 50 Jews, now living in Israel, America, Australia and Europe thanks to their timely transfer as slave laborers to a factory, where the soup was thick enough to sustain life” (233)<sup>3</sup>.

On analyzing the literary works of Australia, it is very explicit that there always exists a bifurcation in the works of the writers. Petersson's view on Thomas Keneally is that “In Keneally's narrative, Schindler has integrated the polar opposites within himself to a practical, social and humane wholeness” (166)<sup>5</sup>. There is a tug between the past history and the present scene, ‘external’ and the ‘internal’ and the ‘home’ and ‘elsewhere.’ In this magnum opus, Oskar Schindler, the ‘ultimate savior,’ the man who had not left anything untouched, appears to save the people from their tribulations and tortures. Had he not been a swindler, a womanizer or a drunkard, he would not have been able to rescue hundreds of Jews. “Virtue in fact is such a dangerous word that we have to rush to explain; Herr Oskar Schindler, risking his glimmering shoes on the icy pavement in this old and elegant quarter of Cracow, was not a virtuous young man in the customary sense” (14)<sup>2</sup>.

This masterpiece illustrates an account of a German industrialist who saved at least 1,300 Jews from the extermination camps. Examining in depth, the life of Schindler, Keneally encircles it with a vast spectrum of enormities. The book deeply scans the ‘sub-human’ and ‘dehuman’ aspects of a man and leaves behind, the memories of a ‘Just Man,’ who saved lives when every fragment of progress was engulfed in destruction, in the horrific clutches of the holocaust. Petersson, on investigating the parallels between Keneally's use of German imagery and the Australian cultural experience, speaks out that, “He (Schindler) becomes what in German is called a *weisser Rabe*, an exceptional ‘white raven’ who, aware of the evil intentions of his peers and familiar with their fatal methods, acts for deliverance and life instead of suffering and death” (232)<sup>5</sup>.

The concept of giving life becomes the honorable base to the long saga of *Schindler's List*. While analysing the character of Schindler we view a wide spectrum of colours that culminates to form the rainbow. Schindler is a fusion of virtues and vices. Through his dishonest ways, he is able to understand the situation and save the lives of many Jews and eventually stands out in the entire nation to give a new definition for life. Thomas Keneally envisages the profundity in the character of Schindler, when he compares the attitude and mindset of other people with that of Schindler. For every other person, the consequences of the war have a slight impact, although it becomes a part of it. But for Schindler, he imbibes all its atrocities and cruelty and carries them along with him. “If you reacted to every little irony of the new Europe, you took it into you, it became part of your luggage but Herr Schindler possessed an immense capacity for carrying that sort of luggage” (16)<sup>2</sup>.

The irony in the above lines speaks of the past unpleasantness and brutality which if people retaliated, would hardly disturb them. On the contrary, to Schindler, the effect of the inhumanity of the Nazis commanders cannot be completely wiped out from his heart and that he has the phenomenal magnitude of shouldering them lifelong. “Those who knew Oskar in those years speak of his easy magnetic charm, exercised particularly over women, with whom he was unremittingly and improperly successful” (19)<sup>2</sup>.

The initial period of Oskar's married life did not give him any solace and encouragement. Adding to this fire, the bankruptcy in his business served as a fuel. He neglected his wife and his father, Herr Schindler Senior and moved away from his family. He started to make speeches on his father's treachery to a ‘good woman.’ Ironically, instead of taking the log from his eyes, he was interested to take the speck from his father's. The rift further widened at the death of his mother and he was determined to support his

aunts and sister. These women could see Herr and Oskar as two brothers separated by the accident of paternity. The web of relationship between the father and the son cannot be explained more explicitly than the way Thomas Keneally has portrayed it. With the metaphorical usage of 'accident of paternity', we understand that it is something tragic and catastrophic and even in the eyes of Oskar, their relationship can only bring about doom and misfortune.

Oskar started his career as a Member of Konrad Henkein's Sudetan German Party in 1938. Very soon he was annoyed by the new National Socialism regime, bullying the Czech population by the seizure of their property. Many people, including Herr Schindler and his father were not for the rule of the Nazis. Keeping in view, the atrocities of these Nazis, Herr Schindler Senior opines and parallels Destiny to a piece of elastic and not a limitless rope. The harder one moves forward, the more fiercely one would be set back to one's point of origin. Perhaps, here he is reminded of the setback in his family and business and he has prophesied the consequences of the actions of the cruelest dictator of the world history, Adolf Hitler. This brings to light the apt and artistic use of the figure of speech equipped by Thomas Keneally, wherein he draws a likeness between Destiny and the elastic material. One is also swept back to the nostalgic atmosphere of a child playing with the catapult. To probe this comparison on the scientific platform, Newton's third law of Motion, comes into action. In other words, with much wrestle and bustle one progresses and climbs the rung, but on the contrary, the actions gradually mellow down and subdue to 'ground zero'. Exceptionally, Schindler, his son does not fall into this category of proving the above fact. He was introduced to Gebauer, who offered him to work for the foreign section of the Abwehr. He was exempted from the army service. He became a close associate of a Jewish accountant, Stern, and with his help and with his own iron-will, he flourished in every step. For he reveals, "I am a capitalist by temperament and I don't like being regulated" (45)<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. Schindler's History- His Story

Schindler, though happens to experience unpleasantness in his life, does not shun himself from the bright side of life, rather with his charming, enthusiastic and intelligent attributes is able to withstand the tempest and emerge successful in the 'limitless rope' of life, which is otherwise for his father. Schindler has to deal with many precarious and brutal people, like Amon Goeth, a German in charge of Plaszow, a labour camp near his factory. He casually murders thousands of Jews when they are no longer useful. At one point of time when Schindler rescues three thousand women from an abandoned trainload of fro-

zen prisoners at Auschwitz, 'the distorted corpses' who were unloaded from the freight cars had seemed less than human. As a consequence of this witness, he persuades the authorities to let him take his Jewish workers to a new factory in Czechoslovakia. 1,100 are on the list of those who are allowed to go and they remain safe, although living in very bad conditions, until the War ends in May 1945.

It is an ironical situation to note that Schindler is able to bring out the best in him, in such a stigmatic period of history. At times, only in such bad and helpless situations, one's real character comes to the forefront. "Only jovial Schindler with his playboy exterior, the apolitical capitalist, one who drinks and plays cards with the devil, succeeds in saving many victims because he is cunning and makes use of the oppressors' own modes and manners" (232)<sup>5</sup>.

Thomas Keneally in this masterpiece has sliced out one phase of the period during the World War II, the micro history of an era. Through this biographical account, he enables us to understand the world of extremes, the elite floating and staggering in a world of luxury and lavishness and getting profited because of the war, and on the other hand, the Jews tortured and agonized by the Nazis and vaporized in the gas chambers. The wider dualism at work in his military historical novels is the balance between the rarefied diverting abnormality of a civil emergency and the unsanctified ordinariness of everyday life. Here stands Schindler sandwiched between the pomp and glory of the war and the turmoil and din of the Jews.

In the prologue, Schindler is pictured as an owner of a booming factory that uses Jewish slave labourers, as a fun-loving freak who attends a dinner party hosted by Amon Goeth, the sadistic commandant of a labour camp outside Cracow. On his way to meet Amon Goeth in his villa, Schindler arrives on his Adler at Jerozolimaska, aptly a name which parallels with Jerusalem. In the Gospel of John 12:13, Jesus was received by the people of Jerusalem with palm branches, proclaiming him to be the King of Israel. Unlike in Jerusalem, here Schindler does not have anyone to proclaim him as a Saviour and King, except for the Forced Labour Camp, Plaszow, and barracks town of 20,000 unquiet Jews. Eventually he becomes a Christ-like figure to experiment, enhance and emancipate the precious lives of these Jews. "Many of Keneally's characters have a utopian dream, an insight that there are better possibilities worth striving for" (232)<sup>5</sup>. On the basis of the interviews conducted by Keneally with those who knew him, this great yarn targets at the use of the devices of a novel to tell a true story. This way of handling the subject is that, Schindler's life resembles something from fiction.

A huge, light-hearted womanizing Schindler stepped into Cracow in 1939, on a look out for commercial oppor-



tunities in the midst of the Nazi occupation. His automatic and unvarying way of representing violence is to separate physical cause from conscious effect. His character to mingle easily with others and his good rapport with his people ensure him a wide association of acquaintances, drinking allies and mistresses. In an interview by Laurie Hergenhan, Thomas Keneally speaks out that “. . . most of the creative energy is spent establishing that the shooting and battle-field maneuvering has only a small place in the texture of the routine life of a country at war” (224)<sup>4</sup>.

The moment he notices the atrocities happening to the Jews, he turns his set of connections into a rescue organization. Keneally garnishes Schindler’s stupendous ‘mirage’ with a spectrum of immensity and magnitude. Bribes and bluff, cognac and con-man effrontery won him permission to run his own camp for the Jewish workers in his factory. It is astonishing to note that the SS psychopaths howling out brutalities at the prisoners and at the same time the bureaucracy of Holocaust debating on the various issues of ‘death case’, are a documentation of contrasts between good and evil, heaped up horrors of the camps and the individual decency of Schindler, outer surroundings of limbo and the inner decorum of a Messiah. The story Keneally documents is one that questions the world of terror and horror with a spark of consciousness and freedom within oneself. It is explicit that while there may be a highly regarded analysis of history to suggest that there is nothing new in this world. The concept of the union of the *Jeevathma* with the *Paramathma* and all people in all cultures are the same, or while the Christian view of man, which Keneally apparently presents, might suppose that there is a historical uprightness of the individual spirit before God.

As Schindler is presented as a ‘soul-reflector’ of actions, he becomes a three-dimensional super hero without ever thinking of his heroic deeds and fated actions. Schindler by nature is an opportunist. The materialistic approach to life leads him to join the Abwehr intelligence service and not the army, and to follow the army into Poland to establish his profitable enamel business supplying army kitchenware. “Schindler’s obsessively convivial style means he can neither retreat into domesticity to avoid what is happening, nor identify with large-scale dreams of resistance” (233)<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, he saves his ‘Jews’ in whatever methods he knows, and utilizes his factory not to manufacture enamel kitchenware but to safeguard their lives and make his factory an industrial unit for lives. Oskar Schindler’s name would have been erased from history, had he not taken the role of a liberator. He has given his permanent imprint in the sickening period of the World War II. Lorna Sage remarks that,

The Schindler material drew him (Keneally) because it was in this sense deeply ‘embarrassing’, an unpredictable triumph of good. As Keneally presents him in the novel Schindler becomes, by at most imperceptible stages, a three-dimensional ‘good’ man, at once alive and in love with life, without ever seeming ‘fated’ or heroic or unnatural. (233)<sup>6</sup>.

Schindler’s name is carved in the pedestal of this historic happening only because he is against every probability, ready to risk everything in a daring, almost flaunted mission of rescue. “The book’s main contrast, though, making it at once harrowing and heartening, is between the heaped-up horrors of camps and the very individual decency of Schindler with his wily pluck, life-saving bonhomie, and altruistic black-marketeering” (231)<sup>7</sup>.

*Schindler’s List* captures us in a very unique form. Its depictions are brought to reality with flesh and blood, and heart and soul. Even after a passage of many decades, this outstanding foil of history is still delicious and fragrant without losing its zeal, mainly because art has amalgamated with history, conveying the entire authentication of rage. Laurie Hergenhan, in his interview agrees that “In every aspect of his published writing and commentary, Thomas Keneally presents a consistent and uniform consciousness: he lives in a world of unresolved dualisms” (224)<sup>4</sup>.

According to Paul Zweig, “In the old epics, a character is occasionally inhabited by a God, and then he acts beyond himself, living on the edge of wonder. When the God leaves him he becomes ordinary once again” (232)<sup>8</sup>. In the same way, for three years during the War, Oskar Schindler was inhabited by a profound moral passion, and then God left him. When the War ended, he drifts from one failed business to another. Eventually he arranges to live part of the year in Israel, supported by his Jewish friends, and part of the year as a sort of internal ‘émigré’ in Frankfurt, where he is often hissed in the streets as a traitor to his race. After 29 unexceptional years, he died in 1974.

## 4. Conclusion

*Schindler’s List* is the chronicle of the sensible conquest of good over evil, an achievement in exceedingly quantifiable, statistical, transparent terms. The immediate and profound impact is given to the readers with the apt blend of narrative techniques like flashbacks, clues and forecasts. By giving the first hand information through the victims’ personal experiences, Keneally drives us into a realm of being one among the 1,300 Jews who were saved by the ‘Messiah’. All the memories of Keneally’s informants converge in the form of Oskar Schindler. It is understood from

the views of Marion Glastonbury, "The author portrays the hardware manufacturer not only as the centre of the action but as the natural heir to an apocalyptic destiny: a life enhancing figure" (233)<sup>3</sup>.

Undoubtedly, *Schindler's List* is one of the most remarkable accounts to emerge from the Second World War. It is a live commentary of history and instant documentation as if conceived by a professional commentator. A subtle mixture of art, history and journalism is very obvious. It is considered as a highly qualified yardstick of the daily routine of the Nazis. It also gives in a nutshell the minute nuances of the conditions and the mentality of the Nazi officers and the enslaved, pathetic and unredeemable state of the Jews. As we read the text, we are carried into a micro historic world of awe and anxiety going to the extent of being one with the good souls of Schindler and his brood. According to Irmtraud Petersson, Keneally "has found history an easier paradigm to work with than the present, and that the best sort of historical novel is the one which is really about the present and uses the past as a sort of working model" (232)<sup>5</sup>.

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