

## **Guilt, responsibility and coincidence in Mulisch's novel, The Assault:**

In this essay, I shall explore the issues of guilt, responsibility and coincidence which appear in Harry Mulisch's novel, *The Assault*. Mulisch's works are quite autobiographical and historical, as there is a great relationship between his life and his novels, especially in the one I am going to deal with. I start with a brief biography, followed by a detailed summary of the novel, and finally come my personal reflection about the issues already mentioned.

**An author's biography:** Harry Mulisch is Holland's most important post-war writer. Born in Haarlem, Holland, in 1927 to a Jewish mother whose family died in the concentration camps, and an Austro-Hungarian father who was jailed after the war for collaborating with the Nazis, Mulisch feels a particularly charged connection with the Second World War, frequently the subject of his work. He has received Holland's highest awards for his novels, plays, poems, and essays. Among his works the best known are his novels *The Assault* (1982), *Last Call* (1985), and *The Discovery of Heaven* (1992).

This essay focuses on his novel **The Assault**. The context of the work is set between 1945 –the end of the Second World War– and 1982 –around the end of the Cold War. This story, based on a true event, has as its central event the murder of a Dutch policeman, who collaborated with Nazi occupants, by some communists who belonged to the resistance. Structurally, the novel is divided into a prologue and five episodes.

The prologue describes the place where young Anton and his family lived; this was Haarlem (Holland) during the Second World War. At this time the north of the country was still occupied by the Nazis.

The first episode takes place in 1945. It tells us how the Dutch collaborator was killed while he was riding his bike in front of a neighbourhood of four houses, and his body fell in front of one of them. Then the two inhabitants of the house went out, took the corpse and moved it in front of the Steenwijk's house, Anton's family home. Anton's brother decided to go out to move the body somewhere else, but while he was out on the street, the German Nazis arrived. They took Anton's parents, shot them and burnt their house. Anton, who had been forgotten in a car by the Nazis during the burning and the execution, was taken by one of the Germans and moved to a cell where he was shut in with one of the supposed killers of the Dutch collaborator. In the cell they talk for a while. In spite of the fact that they could not see each other, as it was totally dark, Anton would never forget her. Finally he was moved to Amsterdam, by the Nazis themselves, with his uncle and aunt.

The next four episodes deal with how Anton attempts to forget that terrible experience of his childhood, but it is not easy for him as he keeps coming across different people, by chance, who were involved in the event of that night.

In the second episode, in 1952, Anton starts to find out the truth about the event. Firstly, he receives the news that his parents and his brother were executed that night in 1945, and secondly, he meets Mr. and Mrs. Beumer in their house in Haarlem. They talk about what they witnessed on the night of the murder. In the third episode, in 1956, the second important coincidental meeting is described. Here he meets, in a demonstration, Fake Ploeg, the son of the Nazi collaborator. The fourth episode, in 1966, is when Anton meets Takes, the other murderer of the collaborator. Finally, in the last episode, in 1981, the protagonist meets Karin Korteweg, the one who together with her father, moved the dead body from their house to the Steenwijk's house. All these meetings will help him to find out what really happened and why.

This novel can be read on different levels: as a psychological drama, as a historical documentary –in spite of the fact that there are fabricated events, for example, the Hungarian revolt of 1956 and the massive peace demonstration in Amsterdam in 1981–, as a mystery story, as an exploration of guilt and responsibility in the

aftermath of the Second World War, and, philosophically, as the making sense of this guilt and responsibility.

I will now focus on the issues of **responsibility, guilt and coincidence**, how they occur and develop throughout the novel and look at the various characters connected to the event of that night.

So we find a country occupied by the Nazis, who are losing the Second World War. It is 1945, and half of the country is already liberated by the Allies. The Netherlands is suffering the Hunger Winter, and the German policy against any kind of resistance has become harsher.

In this context, we have two communists who belong to an organized resistance group, who kill a Dutch collaborator in an increased effort against the Nazis to win the war as soon as possible. But this murder is committed in front of a neighbourhood, and it could have bad consequences for its inhabitants. They may be possible innocent victims, but maybe, thanks to the killing of this collaborator, the deaths of thousands of Jewish families may have been avoided. However, the killing of Anton's family leaves a child orphaned, with an emotional burden which will follow him for the rest of his life.

I will now explore the reactions of the neighbours. Mr. Korteweg and his daughter moved the body towards the Steenwijk's house. Absurdly, Mr. Korteweg moved it because he was trying to save his lizards, however, he is considerate, as he did not leave it in front of the Aarts' house because he knew that they were hiding a Jewish family. But despite of this last fact, he commits suicide as he cannot live with the burden of having caused the death of other human being just to save his animals. The Beumers stayed at home when everything happened without lending a hand, even though they were friends of the family, because if they did it, they would have risked their own lives.

So here we have some different reactions which make you question, how guilty and how innocent these people are, just as Anton asks himself: 'Was guilt innocent and innocence guilty?' In the case of Truus – the woman in the cell – and Takes, you could say that they are more responsible for the consequences since they were aware that the Nazis would punish harshly those they thought to be the culprits. But, how guilty would they both be if they had sacrificed a few lives to save thousands? Or in the case of Mr. Korteweg, is he really guilty of all the consequences of moving the body? Can someone act rationally under such a pressure? Often, under such circumstances one tends to react quickly and spontaneously. Korteweg finally kills himself, but, how guilty was he? Was his suicide justified if, after all, he also saved the Jewish and the Aarts family?

On the other hand, was Anton's family really innocent? Peter – Anton's brother – wanted to leave the dead body in front of the Beumer's house, so he also could be considered guilty. Furthermore, how would the Steenwijk family have reacted if by coincidence the body had been left in front of another neighbour's house?

Another important character is Ploeg, who was a collaborator's son, a son of a Nazi. I will give some special attention to this character. After the Second World War a hard policy of denazification began. All these children were considered guilty just for being the children of Nazis. Ploeg's mother was sent to a camp and Ploeg to a Catholic school even though he was not a Catholic. And when she was liberated they had to move to another city as their house in Haarlem was already inhabited. The consequences for these children was isolation in Dutch society. As it is clearly explained in this quotation: 'After a difficult past, the taboo on their background is an outstanding characteristic of their situation, resulting in the feeling of having no right to be there... The process of moving toward a realization of their right to exist and belong, and to give meaning to their fate, proves to be complex.' As many other children of Nazis, Ploeg cannot believe that his father would have committed any of the notorious outrages against the Jews. It is something that is hard for him to admit. Cases of children of Nazis can be found in the book 'My Father's Keeper: Children of Nazi Leaders – An Intimate History of Damage and Denial' (by Norbert Lebert, Stephan Lebert, Julian Evans), in this book we find different attitudes of these children towards their fathers. Some of them viewed their fathers as great men, one of them loves his father but agrees his father was responsible for great crimes and others hate their fathers. In the case of Ploeg, he tries to justify his father, maybe his love for him does not allow him to accept that his

father could committ such horrific crimes. If we focus on Ploeg, to what extent is he responsible of his father actions? Or what attitude should one have when facing the children of people who have committed such outrages?

Mulisch not only presents the main characters as being guilty and innocent at the same time, but also we can also find in his novel 'good' Nazis and 'bad' Nazis. The member of the SS can be considered 'good' as he decides to carry Anton to Amsterdam himself. The Germans can be considered as 'bad' as they burn Steenwijk's house. Therefore what I think is that Mulisch tries to pose these moral paradoxes in human beings.

The issue of coincidence is also very important in the novel, for instance when the Steenwijk family are playing a game and the assault occurs, Anton keeps the dice in his pocket. The dice can be interpreted as a symbol of chance. We can see that throughout the book a lot of coincidences occur, starting with the assault in front of the neighbourhood, followed by Anton's coincidental meetings, with the different characters. The Beumer family thought that the fact that they did not have the body in front of their house was because God wanted to protect them, but then Mrs. Beumer wonders 'how one should take that? Because that would mean that he didn't spare you (Anton), and why shouldn't he have spared you?' So then why did the coincidences occur in this way? Was it fate, this is to say, because was destined to happen like this? Or could it be God? The book does not give clear answers to these questions, even when Anton finally discovers the truth of what really happened that night.

What also strikes me is Anton's reaction, as he is not a character who takes revenge against the murderers, or against Ploeg's son or the Kortewegs, he is shown as quite an understanding person, who tries to accept and forgive all those who were involved in the event; but above all he wants is to forget about it.

To conclude, I think that the book leaves unanswered questions about how one would react when faced with such a situation and under such circumstances. My personal opinion is that every human being has contradictory facets: egoism and solidarity, goodness and cruelty, the absurdity of some human acts as opposed to the profundity of other acts. Maybe we all are 'good' and 'bad', guilty and innocent at the same time, and in a situation of fear and repression our real character may appear, and therefore it leads us to behave on very different ways. Therefore I think that all the controversial of the characters leads us to moral questions such as, are we all guilty or innocent, and are we responsible for our actions?

Harry Mulisch, *The Assault*, translated from Dutch to English by Claire Nicolas White, Ed. Pantheon Books, New York, 1985, first page: *About the Author*

Harry Mulisch, *The Assault*, translated from Dutch into English by Claire Nicolas White, Ed. Pantheon Books, New York, 1985, p. 184

<http://www.ncptsd.org/publications/rq/rqpdf/V8N1.PDF> LINDT, M.W.J. Children of collaborators: From isolation toward integration.

Harry Mulisch, *The Assault*, translated from Dutch into English by Claire Nicolas White, Ed. Pantheon Books, New York, 1985, p. 71