



The Voice of 'Death'; Recollecting the Trauma and Survival of the Holocaust Victims in *The Book Thief*

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Abstract:

Markus Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief* can be treated within the genre of 'Holocaust Literature' as it mainly depicts the story of a nine-year-old German girl, Liesel Meminger and her continuous struggle for survival during the Second World War. Liesel experienced the outrages of war when her brother died and when her mother abandoned her to the care of the foster parents. Narrated through the voice of 'Death', *The Book Thief* presents a story of trauma recovery as Liesel learns to cope with her loss. Through the images of the historical narrative of the holocaust, Liesel's distinct story conveys the universal story of recovery. This paper intends to analyse the trauma, memory and recovery of Liesel Meminger by viewing *The Book Thief* as a story of trauma recovery that essentially initiates the collective story of Holocaust survivors. The novel represents the traumatic notions with an emphasis on the changing discourse between the victim and the perpetrator, as it attempts to confront the effects of both holocaust memory and the German perpetrator trauma.

Key Words: World War II, Holocaust, Death, Trauma Narrative, Memory, and Recovery.

Introduction

Markus Zusak is a young adult fictionist of German-Austrian descent renowned for artistic craftsmanship and exuberance. Zusak's magnum opus, *The Book Thief* published in 2005, recaptures the trauma caused by war-torn Germany upon its inhabitants. The novel is completely overshadowed by the various traumatic undertones ignited by the Holocaust and the Second World War. The chief protagonist in the novel, Liesel Meminger is the representative of the entire traumatized community who faces the darkest moments of their life and still survives. Liesel bears a living testimony to the intensity of destruction that the Second World War can have upon the life of a fragile child.

The Book Thief has done a brilliant job in weaving the story of a young girl with that of the human suffering during the Holocaust which makes even an adult reader a fan of the book, not because of the sufferings but because of the way the story speaks about the trauma and the characters who go through it. The narrator himself puts readers on the first veil of trauma, as The Death narrates the story. "HERE IS A SMALL FACT: You are going to die" (3). This is one of the first notes in the beginning chapter of the novel

and literally sets the tone of trauma throughout. One views life in an existential mode through the eyes of Death, as how the scythe bearer himself has to take all the souls away, and also his inevitable awareness about what is going to happen to Liesel's family and friends in the end. The Death becomes the ultimate witness for the entire trauma happening and yet has to stay calm and do his duty like normal.

Trauma and recovery are the dual faces of holocaust literature. *The Book Thief* offers a realistic picture of the Holocaust from a distant perspective, shedding light on the horrors associated with one of the darkest chapters in the face of world history. It is an eye-opener to the atrocious horrors of the Holocaust. Liesel's story represents the universal experience of those who are involved in the holocaust, whether they are victims, observers or oppressors. Liesel's traumatic experiences begin and end within Death's palm- both the tragic death of her brother and the dreadful destruction of the Himmel Street in the concluding part. The study explores the ways that Death catalyzes her trauma and simultaneously provides a voice through which her story manifests. Death reaches beyond the novel's three-dimensional plot to reveal the core of her trauma and post traumatic stress disorder. To accomplish this task Death incorporates various techniques that reveal his role in the story. From a fractured narrative to shifting focalization, Death personifies the disjointed experience of trauma.

Nestled in the war-torn Europe, Liesel's childhood is filled by encounters with Death. Every phase of the novel addresses for the silent voice of the traumatized, from Death's narration to Liesel's story. The personified Death assumes various roles throughout this novel to speak when Liesel cannot. Sometimes he is the savior for those who are suffering and some other times he is the voice for the dying souls who cannot speak. But most importantly, Death acts first and foremost as the initiator of Liesel's trauma. Liesel encounters Death for the first time when her brother dies in a train. The initial disastrous blow came upon her in the form of the death of her only brother, Werner. The tragedy was unbearable and she was completely struck and unable to recognize the depth of trauma to which she was subjugated. "For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement, and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. *Esstimmtnicht*. This isn't happening and the shaking" (21). Her heart broke apart at the sight of the death of her only sole companion. Even though Death does not threaten her, watching the death of her brother sends her into traumatic shock. As Death says, "With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief . . . could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead" (20). With one eye opened and other still dreaming, Liesel encounters death for the first time.

While her brother's death leads to the traumatic shock, her trauma intensifies when her mother abandons her. While her mother thinks for the safety of her daughter, Liesel suffers a traumatic shock of being abandoned in a strange world with strangers. As she enters Himmel Street for the first time, she is nothing more than a "lost, skinny child, in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone" (32). Once Liesel loses her family, she loses her own identity. The correlation between lost family and lost identity is clarified in Herman's theory of trauma recovery. Herman explains, "A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self" (Herman 52). While Liesel is surrounded by the people who love her, such as her foster parents Hans & Rosa Hubermann, her bosom friend Rudy and later her hidden companion Max, she struggles to connect with as she lost her sense of trust. Since her identity relies upon her relationship with others, she shuts herself away from her own identity by severing these connections. In addition, Herman explains that the traumatic event "destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others" (53). Without an understanding of self, Liesel cannot configure her moral position in the world. She becomes a girl of darkness in the shadow of death.

Escapism is one of the survival strategies in Holocaust Literature. The term is used to describe the phenomenon of escaping reality in order to cope up with the harsh realities of life. According to Robert Heilman, escapism is a "habitual diversion of mind to imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine (445)". In the novel, *The Book Thief*, escapism helps its characters to escape from the harsh realities of the Second World War and Holocaust. Through escapism they can experience some relief from their real life trauma and so are able to resume a normal life as usual. But the danger is that they may not want to come out of their fantasy world. Liesel, the book thief, is the prime example for it. She has

sought solace in books and adapted a mechanism of stealing books to settle with the scores of life. She believed books had a therapeutic power that would heal her wounded self. Her first stolen book *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, relieved her of the trauma caused by the death of her only brother. Hence she recognized that, “. . . the books and the words started not just to mean something, but everything” (30).

Liesel escaped to the imaginary world of books, when she had an accidental visit to the huge library of Ilsa Herman. It sucked her towards it and left her astonished at the marvelous scope of the world. She was so excited to see “all different styles and sizes of lettering on the spines of the black, the red, the grey, the every-coloured books. It was one of the most beautiful things Liesel Meminger had ever seen.” (145) The animate world of books thus absolutely allured the psyche of Liesel. Thus, Liesel Meminger's escapism came through her resort to the microcosmic world of books of which she was a part: “She survived because she was sitting in a basement reading through the story of her own life, checking for mistakes” (528). With the close association to her loss, book thievery partially returns what she lost during her first encounter of Death. When faced with trauma, Liesel loses control; by stealing books, she may reclaim that control once again.

Another important character in the story, Max Vandenburg, also opted escapism as in the same mode as of Liesel. He was a Jewish fist-fighter and a pathetic victim of the Holocaust and his escapism resumed soon after he had left his family for his own safety. *Mein Kampf*, the autobiography of Adolf Hitler, the man who wanted to eliminate all Jews, turned out to be his savior and his life-saving book. It contained a route map to the street in Molching, and a key to Hubermann's house. The title of the book also ironically refers to Max, as his own existence has been a struggle against political and religious oppression.

Max has mastered the skill of escapism through various attempts. As being a Jew by birth, he had to escape from the Nazi surveillance. He also had a narrow escape from the clutches of Death, while he was hiding in Hubermann's house. Death had to surrender before Max's resilience power and Death recounted it as:

I realized much later that I actually visited 33 Himmel Street in that period of time . . . for all I saw was a man in bed. I kneeled. I readied myself to insert my hands through the blankets. Then there was resurgence — an immense struggle against my weight. I withdrew, and with so much work ahead of me, it was nice to be fought off in that dark little room. (339-340)

Hans Hubermann, the only accordionist in the Himmel Street, also escaped from the hands of Death twice. His sheer optimism turned his life-guarding principle at times of all trials and tribulations. He successfully evaded Death for the first time during the First World War and he was optimistic about his subsistence in the Second World War. He was fortunate enough as his fate got diverted to another individual. Trauma and escapism of all the characters both of German and Jewish blood is poignantly captured in the holocaust novel, *The Book Thief*. Thus it becomes the part and parcel of Holocaust Literature.

As Death's voice echoes through the pages of the novel, he accomplishes more than telling a nine-year girl's story. He extends into each layer of a three-dimensional plot of trauma, an outer dimension where the horrors of World War II surround the German city of Molching, a surface dimension where Liesel's life evolves on Himmel Street, and an inner dimension where Liesel struggles with the darkness of her traumatic encounter with Death. *The Book Thief* avoids Liesel's narration, as she cannot tell her story completely. At the same time, Death presents a holistic review of the three-dimensional plot due to his supernatural point of view. Additionally, he accesses the plot of the surface dimension when he collects Liesel's story from the ashes of Himmel Street. Then, using his gathered knowledge of the War and Himmel Street, Death reaches past the surface of Liesel's life and into the core darkness of her traumatic experience. Subsequently, he emerges throughout the novel to speak of and to speak for this traumatized character.

In addition, Death also uses the developing plot of the Second World War to emphasize Liesel's traumatic experience. At first, Death places the horrifying violence of world war off stage, exemplifying how traumatic violence cannot be fully faced. Finally Death allows three brief glimpses into the overwhelming deaths during the World war. They are described in the form of diary entries regarding his journey throughout Europe. In each entry, he reports the mass-slaughter with poetic language that further distances the events in a contradictory tone. He swings from anger to cynicism and to compassion. He does

not depict the historical events in detail; he merely, narrates the facts. In these moments, he mimics the inability of traumatized individuals to describe the event. They can only recall that something has occurred. Without his morbid presence, *The Book Thief* would lose universality of Liesel's experience. Death provides a pedestal on which her story can be placed and Death speaks where no voice can be heard.

Conclusion

The concluding chapters of the novel depict the end of the happiness of Liesel, describing bombings and death of her family and the destruction of Himmel Street. But she lives on and meets Death towards the end of her own life after living the rest of the years happily. The story portrays Liesel as a survivor—everyone says 'there is a girl who survived on Himmel Street'. The last chapter begins with the note of Death stating Liesel's death after she became old—“A LAST FACT: I should tell you that the book thief died yesterday.” (577) Even though sufferings surround 'the book thief', the novel ends happily with Death presenting Liesel's own book “The Book Thief”. It is one of those true to life testimonies of the lives of people of those times, narrated through the fictional tale of *The Book Thief*. Here the title takes the double meaning of the work by the author and by Liesel. The narrator ends the novel with a note: “I am haunted by humans” (584) Thus *The Book Thief* is an intriguing testimony of trauma and survival. The trauma that comes with suffering is hard to forget but still they survive with the power of will and experiences.

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