

The Book Thief - An Intriguing Testimony for the Trauma in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to see how trauma can be portrayed in Young Adult fiction by analyzing *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zusak. It tries to bring forward the various aspects narration and documentation which makes it an intriguing testimony of suffering and survival in the Holocaust time. It tries to identify the genre of Young Adult Fiction and how trauma can be identified with it and introduced to young adults. It also tries to bring forward the aspects which makes *The Book Thief* one of best read novels in Young Adult category which are loved by adults too even after a decade, with a special focus on holocaust testimony and trauma. It tries to shed light on how the well received novel is an excellent testimony to the holocaust victims, with the protagonist being a young adult in the heart of Germany.

KEYWORDS: Young adult fiction, trauma, testimony, book thief, holocaust, suffering

INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising to say that in the present century, trauma is more than prevalent as it was before in the last century, and with the coming of Covid-19 pandemic we are practically living and breathing in it every day. So, while we try to find out ways to overcome the fear and distress caused by the pandemic, we come across books and literature which puts us into a dream world where we can forget these worries for sometime. And more than that, it gives us a form of purgation or katharsis from these pains, as we read and experience the sufferings of the characters in their worlds. This is important, especially for children, teenagers or young adults who suffer more without knowing what suffering is, or what is going on around. They should be encouraged to read works which showcases trauma and suffering from a perspective which they can comprehend, so that they can grasp it in the right way and will help them to develop their outlook. The most popular novels in YA category include *Harry Potter* series (1997) (though technically part of children's literature), *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) (technically Adult fiction portraying experiences of young adult), *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* series (2011), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) and so on. As M'balia Thomas notes, "Though marketed for a young adult audience, occurrences and tales of psychologically traumatic experiences appear across Rowling's seven *Harry Potter* novels, with many of these events preceding the publication dates of the actual novels" (8). Meanwhile YA fiction like *13 Reasons Why* (2007), *The Hate You Give* (2017), *Two Can Keep a Secret* (2019) etc especially portray trauma in the lives of young adults. In the words of Stephanie Miller, ". . . in 2008 Collins published *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008),

which centers around two dozen teens fighting each other to the death. Characters in this novel react to traumatic events not just for a chapter, but for two entire sequels” (5). And since those times the popularity of YA fiction displaying trauma has increased to manifold. “As a result, this series not only depicted more trauma, but also examined the trauma-to-reaction-to-recovery process itself. This opened the door for other authors to do the same, and they have not disappointed” (5).

In Young Adult fiction, *The Book Thief* (2005), a historical fiction by Markus Zusak, is one of the finest examples which showcases trauma and suffering from the point of view of a nine-year-old, in the backdrop of one of the most horrific and traumatic events of the last century. The work showcases the talent of the author in understanding the trauma faced by young minds and how they react to their stimulus in most elaborate ways. It is written in such lucid language that young adults can comprehend, but it is also so gripping a tale, as not to disappoint any other reader who comes across this work, even a decade later.

TRAUMA & YOUNG ADULTS

The term ‘young adults’ refers to the transition stage between a child and an adult and hence we can say that, these age group has the qualities of both the child group and the adult category. We can use the common name of teenagers but the idea of Young Adults gives them a sort of maturity and freedom that these age groups are trying to achieve. As connecting with that, when it comes to understanding trauma from a Young Adult point of view it is much more complicated and intriguing than in the case of a child, as young adults do not fit into neither category of adult or children. They are a group on their own, and hence it requires a deeper pondering and understanding of their minds and perspectives.

Trauma, or simply speaking the terror caused by an unhappy event, can affect an adult in manifold ways. So, no doubt how many subtle but unspeakable ways it can affect a young adult. Caruth defines trauma in relation to the “structure of its experience” and as an event “that is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Trauma 4). So it can take multiple forms and ways to represent itself in a child or a young adult, either extreme silence and meekness to violent and frantic behaviour. Also, Caruth says, “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9). Thus it can be understood as an important part of growing up and developing one’s identity as many people who develop behavioural problems in future are said to have a traumatic past while growing up.

Young Adult Fiction is comparatively a more recent evolution in the category of novels. As Belbin says, “YA novels were short: less than half the length of the average adult novel, which was then 70– 80,000 words (both have since grown)”. There are mainly two kinds of Young Adult fiction, one which is written by adults keeping in mind their audience as young adults and develop the story as viewing from a young adult perspective. As Pramesti notes, “‘Young adult authors write from the viewpoint of young people’: YA books are written through the eyes of adolescents” (3). The other being the novels written by adults who develop stories which engages young adults or has the elements which interests them. The former forms the largest category when you search for young adult fiction as a genre and the major contributor category that are prescribed for reading for young adults. “The deal for YA authors is that you are there to keep readers reading” (Belbin). And hence topics, stories and adventures which fall under the interest of young adults will always be popular in this genre provided they pass the scrutiny of parents and teachers. We can infer from the many bestsellers in this category that “‘Successful young adult novels deal with emotions that are

important to young adults': YA fiction addresses issues of physical growth and mental maturity in adolescents' developmental tasks" (Pramesti 3).

Markus Zusak, as a young adult had some background of a holocaust past, with his parents being a German and Austrian, who had migrated to Australia and this experience helps the author to write realistically; As Jennifer writes, ". . . and voice as he explains how he turned his parents' stories about growing up in wartime Munich into an award-winning novel" (28), Zusak certainly has grown up with that heritage of knowing the stories of the Holocaust and its experiences, which would certainly have helped him in writing *The Book Thief*, which is the story of an orphan girl amidst the WW2 and the Holocaust. This aspect certainly adds credibility to this novel, besides it already being one of the most popular works in YA genre, loved by both children and adults alike. Zusak is someone who has the skills and talent to make the impossible possible in the world of narration and storytelling as is seen through his works, even though the numbers are less. He is one of those authors who focus on details rather than number. Chris Crowe states, "This might have been a very bleak novel, but Zusak turns it into a wonderful story built upon the fierce love of two brothers"(132) regarding *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*(2000), which is yet another young adult novel by Zusak before *The Book Thief*.

An intriguing Testimony

'Testimony', as the word suggests can be a formal statement in law; attesting something or simply evidence or proof of something. Apart from this, when we come to real life situations testimony can be done in many different forms apart from the formal ones even though the written and oral forms are still the most powerful. Literature in that sense is considered as one of the most effective forms where we can narrate stories and ideas and through it histories. Those things which we cannot openly convey are conveyed in memoirs, autobiographies and other personal narratives which gives a testimony to their lives and also their past lives which includes the history of their land and culture. Still more, if we want to spread the idea to the masses, we can choose more popular forms like novels and periodicals which narrate stories which no one has heard yet or those which were not considered to be true. Through the characters in these works one can represent in one way or the other a form of testimony to those past lives or incidents. This becomes more important when the testimony is about revealing some truth, pain or suffering or any other traumatic experiences that one has gone through in their past. This is why holocaust narratives are still popular today, as it narrates the horrors of the Nazi regime and the sufferings of the Jews and every other individual who were tortured in this propaganda of Hitler. Still today we can say that there are many unknown stories and sufferings which are yet to see the light of day.

Survival is another important aspect connecting to trauma and suffering, as all these experience and narration leads to a better awareness and eventually survival in life. Hence testimony can be said as a cause of survival as giving testimonies and reading them or knowing them will eventually lead people to have a better life with the knowledge and the courage they get from these stories and narrations. This is especially true in the case of young adults and young adult fiction, as it helps them to have identity and develop perspectives and ideas which will help them to live a better future and also helps in spreading that knowledge to others.

In this vast array of holocaust narratives *The Book Thief* stands apart as a shining piece of work not only because it narrates the horrors of holocaust showcasing the life of a young girl and forms another tribute to victims; but also, it tells the life of a 'book thief' who has learned to grow amidst the horrors of Nazi Germany with her love for books and her 'gained' family and gives us a

one of a kind adventure through one of chilling times of history. It is intriguing, as set in the heart of Nazi regime, being under the nose of Hitler, the young lad, or we can say the young adult Liesel Meminger, is able to defy at least a couple of rules with the help of her friend and family and come out as a victor. Though we can say that she is a part of all those suffering, the story is unique and intriguing as it is narrated from the perspective of 'death' himself, personified as an individual, who weaves a tale of vibrant colours, showing different moods and incidents for each colour. The trauma and suffering seen through the eyes of death is indeed the most realistic testimony of the life of people under the Nazi regime.

As Shoshana Felman elucidates, "I recognize three separate, distinct levels of witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being witness to the process of witnessing itself" (75). We can say that one can find all these three aspects of witnessing in *The Book Thief*, either through the characters, the narrator or even as the reader himself being the witness to all the traumatic incidents that had happened in the past. As a result, the readers are themselves put as a witness through the process of witnessing, while reading the book and experiencing the lives of the characters which includes the narrator, The Death.

What makes a testimony credible and effective is the involvement of facts and dates; and *The Book Thief* provides an enormous amount of dates and facts, related to that time at each and every point of the narration, whether it be chapter wise or related to an event - "DEATH'S DIARY: 1942 - It was a year for the ages, like 79, like 1346, to name just a few" (Zusak 329). Here the all the dates suggest some or the other catastrophic event in the history of Europe. There are also small scripts in between the main narration which reveals the thoughts of the character or what they want to say making the reader feel as if reading a direct testimony to an event or fact. Also, before every 'part' or divisions in the book, there is summary of facts involved in it or like the major points to be noted as if in a testimony or a note writing. There are also illustrations of their experiences and their feelings against Nazism added to give a realistic feeling as well as letters addressed to various characters which gives the feeling of a realist historical novel or in other ways a testimony of the past.

As the title suggests, the story is driven by the life of a girl who steals books to satisfy her hunger for knowledge, which makes this testimony all the more intriguing. In one way we can say that, as testimonies are always valued from honest people, being a thief and revealing her story as the testimony for an event may not always seem believable, that too by all people. But, apart from that, one can say it is one of the well written fictions on Holocaust, and Nazi Germany on a micro level. We are simply drawn to this adventure of an orphan girl, who is intrigued by books, and goes to the extend of stealing it so that she can learn something about her life and what is happening around her. This is connected with the larger story of what is happening in Nazi Germany and how it affects Liesel's life when one day a Max Vandenburg, a Jew is brought to her house for safekeeping. The relation Liesel builds with this Jew and others, through books and reading, forms the crux of this novel. It is rare to find a work which connects one with life and books especially in Holocaust genre in the way the *The Book Thief* does, which is what makes the story all the more intriguing and one of a kind in its genre.

Traumatic Experience in *The Book Thief*

Suffering comes with trauma and they are mostly inseparable. Sometimes, one needs to go through it, in order to come out of it. When one is not able to express their inner ideas or thoughts,

especially if it involves some sort of pain and trauma, surely one can turn to literature to narrate such traumatic experiences. Hence, Holocaust literature narrate the sufferings of the victims more as compared to other works which has a background of Holocaust. But for a YA Fiction to do that is truly a challenge and an achievement since it read by young adults, who may be just introduced, into the world of Holocaust or its traumatic experiences. As Buráková elucidates:

Marcus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* (2005) seems to be the kind of narrative that carefully insists on attempting to comprehend both sides of collective traumatic experience. Its unusual treatment of the Holocaust, German-Jewish relationships, and the journey into the psyche of ordinary Germans during the Second World War makes it a memorable story that offers a new perspective on the epistemology of trauma, especially in terms of trauma resolution (2).

The Book Thief has done a wonderful job in weaving the story of the 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 put us on the first veil of trauma, as it is narrated by The Death, which itself is the cause for trauma for many people in this world. "HERE IS A SMALL FACT: You are going to die" (3) - This is one of the first notes in the starting chapter of the novel and literally sets the tone of trauma throughout. The narrator continues to say, "Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me." Though he consoles the reader in the next page by bringing out his brighter and positive persona by saying an atonement, a "REACTION TO THE AFOREMENTIONED FACT", which is a much required element when we consider a work for young adults to read and enjoy. He considers our feelings, questions his manners and then says, "Does this worry you? I urge you - don't be afraid. I'm nothing if not fair." This sets the mood for the whole story of adventure, but also suffering. He says that there is no one to replace him as he is inevitable. He uses the term 'leftover humans' for the survivors. He describes them as 'crumbling' in the 'jigsaw puzzle of realisation, despair and surprise.' He sees them as having 'punctured hearts' and 'beaten lungs.' Use of such phrases brings us into a state of tension and misery, though it is attributed in an emotionless tone at the start of the novel. 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 to happen to Liesel's family and friends in the end. The death becomes the ultimate witness for all the trauma happening and yet has to stay calm and do his duty like normal. But he comments, "And I needed a holiday" tired from all the work he has to do as the caretaker of their souls (329).

Though not part of the major trauma in the novel, we see glimpses of how a young adult like Liesel gets to live in a family away from her own mother. The small nuances of teenage life is well presented and adds to the experiences of a teenager growing up. Rosa calls her "You filthy pig!" for not agreeing to bath eventhough she is a caring mother inside (33). We get to see the bad side of Rosa calling her 'saukeral' which is German for 'rascal,' throughout the novel, though it is in a way balanced by the trauma she feels when she loses Rosa, her mama, at the end. The dreams of her night about loosing her original family repeatedly gave her nightmares and bad nights, though she was later comforted by Hans, her foster father. The readings with Papa was her sense of relief and joy in all these situations. The small tension with the landlady IlsaHermann gave misery to Liesel though she was comforted by her gift of books later.

The use of German throughout the novel gave a sort of ambience to the events as set during the Nazi time in Germany. The author has indeed incorporated this element though he was not

himself a native German. The depiction of the walk of Jewish prisoners to the concentration camp of Dachau was indeed heartbreaking. It has a sense of re-narration of history as well as the trauma experienced by the characters and the prisoners. Towards the end, when Max, the Jew was caught, and on his way to the camp, met Liesel on road. It was a meeting that no reader, who was involved in the journey, could forget - “*Is it really you? the young man asked,*’ she said. *‘Is it from your cheek that I took the seed?’* (543)” Liesel’s realization of seeing Max and the subsequent events were written with utmost care by the author, which evokes instances of happiness, sadness and a feeling of longing in Liesel as well as the young adult reader. The writings of *‘The Standover Man’* and *‘The Word Shaker’* remains in the minds of all young adult readers as a testimony to their friendship.

The penultimate ‘parts’ in the novel depicts the end of Liesel’s happiness, describing bombings and death of her family. 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’s a girl,’ the lady said, ‘who survived on Himmel Street.’” The last chapter begins with the note of the news of Liesel’s death after she became old, as, “A LAST FACT: I should tell you that the book thief died only yesterday” (577). The descriptions of the colours of the sky describe the mood and events throughout the story, like when Rudy died, “In Liesel’s vision, the sky I saw was grey and glossy. A silver afternoon. (581)” Even though miseries surround ‘the book thief,’ the novel ends happily, with Death presenting Liesel, her own book, *The Book Thief*. As we understand now, 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 also by Liesel. The narrator Death ends the novel by noting, “I am haunted by humans” (584).

The language, style and tone used in the book also adds to the feeling of loneliness, existentialism and sort of sadness which can lead to trauma, though when we see from the point of view of the girl, it is always determination and positivity, eventhough the overall theme says otherwise. As Death says, “Your soul will be in my arms. A colour will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away” (4). It feels like the bleak ray of hope in the clouded sky, as in many occasions in the latter part of the book the sky is described in a similar way. It also adds a sense of hopefulness and hopelessness at the same time. “It was January 1939. she was nine years old, soon to be ten. Her brother was dead.” - an example of how Liesel is brought back to reality after a nightmare about Hitler himself (21). Such sharp usages of phrases gives us a kick in the heart regarding the reality of life and one’s pain and suffering. The analysis of the novel based on psychoanalysis, adds another dimension to the novel as it considers how the young adult’s mind is affected when traumatic situations are narrated, and how they take in the minor aspects of trauma or stress as part of their own lives. Trauma, as Heidarizadehspeaks, “is an experience lived belatedly at the level of its unspeakable truth which is revealed in psychoanalytic theory. So that psychoanalysis can consider the “textual anxieties” surrounding the representation of trauma” (789).

The novel breaths through Liesel as she is the ray of hope in the book; but what she is breathing around her is full of suffering and trauma in one sense, though like every life is kindled by another, there is always her family, friends and such neighbours who are strangers at first, but who support her and drive her passion for reading.

Conclusion

The Book Thief is an intriguing testimony of suffering and survival. The trauma that comes

with suffering is hard to forget but still they survive with the power of will and experiences. The stories which travel through generations about past sufferings is surely one of the strongest forces behind these experiences and courage we obtain to face traumatic situations in our lives. Hence, literature is an excellent way of representation, communication and testimony especially when it comes to children and young adults. Even after a decade and more, it still feels refreshing to go back and read *The Book Thief* and be part of the different colours of life painted vibrantly by Zusak. It is still one of the finest works of Young Adult fiction that we know today and sets the standard for all the works written in YA genre, a decade ago and even today.

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