



Empowerment Of The Other In Markus Zusak's The Book Thief

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Abstract: The events of the Holocaust and its atrocious outcome had left behind its content from the realm of understanding. Its violent nature fractured the cultural narrative and led the people to question the integrity of the content because it is not easily understandable. Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* is a genuine attempt to voice the reality of the Holocaust Victims. Liesel's story reflects the same impression of the traumatized who survived the Holocaust. The traumatic experience leaves a gash in the identity of the survivor and this can be testified by the experience portrayed in this novel. This paper entitled *Empowerment of the Other in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief* is an attempt to justify the importance of relationships and friendship in the rehabilitation of the traumatized. This contextualizes the traumatic experiences in the novel. Focusing on the protagonist, there will be an exploration of her confronting experience with trauma and her haunting encounter with death. This paper also attempts to legitimize the importance of a community in the process of recovery.

Index Terms – Holocaust, trauma, recovery, relationships, community, survival, empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

The Book Thief is a novel written by Markus Zusak that follows the life of Liesel Meminger, a nine-year-old German girl who was abandoned by her mother to the care of a foster family. This nine-year-old was also a victim of war atrocities. These violent transgression ruffles the foundation of her evolving identity and defaces her narrative. Liesel is not always a direct victim of the gruesome war but she is forced to experience the aftermath of others' death. *The Book Thief* is a story that presents a traumatic journey of a child. Recounting through the voice of Death, the novel offers a solution to all the confusion experienced by the protagonist and she eventually learns to cope with the suffering. From another perspective, the novel being a part of the developing canon of Holocaust Literature shows the destructive nature of trauma and proclaims the necessity of a social circle in the recuperation of the traumatized. The novel *The Book Thief* can also be read as a reflection of the collective experience of Holocaust survivors. Liesel's story reflects the impression of the traumatized who survived the Holocaust. The traumatic experience leaves a gash in the identity of the survivor and this is testified by the experience of the real Holocaust victims. Trauma and identity are closely related. When a person goes through an intensely traumatic experience it naturally alters his perspective toward life and in most cases, the changes create a massive shift in their character. Traumatic experiences, in fact, disturb the normal idea or concept of life. People often follow a pattern in creating their present and future. Here is an exploration of the journey of her recovery focusing on her empowerment through the safety of relationships that will teach her to tackle her agony. This is also an attempt to justify the importance of relationships and friendship in the rehabilitation of the traumatized focusing on the protagonist because of her confronting experience with trauma and her haunting encounter with death. This also throws light on her empowerment through the security of her relationships, legitimizing the importance of a community in the process of recovery.

II. TRAUMATIC ENCOUNTER

The Book Thief unravels in the palm of death. The novel opens with the tragic death of Liesel's brother and ends with the catastrophe that strikes Himmel Street. The childhood of the protagonist is filled with her encounters with death due to the backdrop of war. Though she seeks constant grounding in this continuous destruction, her traumatic experience shoves her into the path of incertitude. Narrated from the perception of death, this novel stands for the silence of the traumatized. Death as the personified narrator becomes the voice for Liesel during her extreme encounter with the agony that silences her. Death assumes different roles in the novel. Some instances in the novel put forth death as the saviour and others as the voice for the dying soul. But most importantly, death stands as the initiator of Liesel's traumatic experiences. Though the novel set forth an illusion that the protagonist is fighting with political power (Hitler), her actual war is against acceptance of death and its impact on her consciousness.

Liesel's first encounter with death is during her brother's death. She was in her attempt to resist the loss of her brother. It is then that she faces death which shatters her narrative. "The second eye jumped awake and she caught me out, no doubt about it. It was exactly when I knelt down and extracted his soul, holding it limply in my swollen arms. He warmed up soon after, but when I picked him up originally, the boy's spirit was soft and cold, like ice cream. He started melting in my arms. Then warming up completely Healing" (29). Here Liesel is not able to process what she witnessed as she is imprisoned by the "stiffness of movement, and the staggered onslaught of thought" (29). She is not able to recognize death due to her staggering thought. Though she physically witnesses death (her brother's death), her mind is weak enough to process reality. In this instance, death is referring to the fact that her mind remains in a dream-like state and is unable to process what she sees. She is in an in-between state. This is her first encounter with death that ignites her journey as traumatized.

Her trauma is enhanced when her mother abandons her immediately after her brother's death. Her mother sends her off to the foster family with the pure intention to protect her, but Liesel experiences a trauma shock when she found herself in unknown surroundings following the loss of her brother. In a single day, she lost her entire world and becomes "an expert being left behind" (15). Liesel expected her mother to be her saviour but in turn, her trust is broken when she abandoned her. This led to her loss of faith in relationships.

Later when she was adopted by the Hubermanns, despite the isolation she experiences from her own family, death isolates her from her own identity. Death put her in an absolute state of invisibility. Liesel's foundation of identity is shattered when she is deserted by her mother. This explains the reason why she fails to trust Hans, Rudy, and later Max in the beginning. She is not able to recognize her position in the world due to her inability to identify herself. During the funeral of her brother, she is refusing to accept her brother's death and, in that state, her mother's touch feels like a threat. Her mother is trying to drag her away from the grave.

According to Herman, a victim of traumatic shock will gradually begin to develop hyperarousal due to their anticipation of sudden danger and this justifies the behaviour pattern exhibited by the protagonist. Now as she is aware of her mortality, it enhances her fear of danger. Even when was taken into the care of Hubermanns, she is anticipating danger though the journey promises her safety. Liesel revisits her encounter with trauma through dreams and flashbacks. This is an unconscious effort of the mind to assure her survival. And her constant revisits to the past finally provide her with clarity about the presence of death. During her first days with Hubermanns, Liesel suffers from nightmares and flashbacks of her brother's death. In the beginning, she revisits the past with the hope to change that. But gradually the flashbacks transform into nightmares and she is forced to witness her brother's death daily.

III. Empowering the Relationships

Relationships play a crucial role in the life of Liesel Meminger as it helps her in the process of recovery. Being a victim of trauma due to her encounter with death and abandonment by her mother, Liesel withdraws herself into silence. She fails to connect with others due to her lack of faith (in relationships). Critics such as Herman and Caruth explains that after going through severe trauma, the victim experience and project a disconnection from the world. According to Judith Herman, the first step towards recovery is to build (or rebuild) the lost relationships. This is an important phase in Liesel's recovery because gradually it empowers her to take back the power. After her brother's death, Liesel realizes her mortality and this ignites her fear of death. When her mother renounced her, she saw a possible threat in her own surroundings. Suddenly she experiences an inability to cope with her loss and it pushes her into a spiral of emotional damage.

Safety and empowerment are considered vital components of recovery and in the novel *The Book Thief*, Liesel reaches out to her foster parents for that protection. The more she experienced safety the better she could connect with the environment. She places her trust in Hans Hubermann for the first time after her encounter with abandonment. His love and attention freed her from the fear of betrayal. This helped her to expand her connection and friendship with others in her surroundings. These relationships and friendships slowly empowered her with a key to overcoming her sufferings. Liesel's new chapter in Himmel Street opens the door to physical and mental protection. The safety provided by her foster family set fire to the journey of her recovery.

When Liesel entered the house of Hubermanns, she was provided with enough food and shelter. These basic requirements for survival were not met during her time with her mother. After her father went missing, her mother failed to meet the end. She was not able to take care of her children. Liesel and Warner were never given enough food and she believes that is the cause of her brother's death. They were malnourished and never had a proper shelter. Her necessities to survive were met when she began her journey with Hubermanns. She had a steady supply of food even though the burned eggs and pea soup often didn't satisfy her appetite. But she was happy that she no longer suffered from starvation.

During her final days with her mother and brother, they didn't have a roof over themselves. They were often questioned by guards and threatened to leave her house. It forced them to constantly travel to save themselves and most days they slept in trains and railway stations. Gradually she began to develop insomnia due to this abnormal lifestyle. The normalcy of the Hubermanns household assured her of safety and stability. Rosa Hubermann is characterized as a tough woman in the novel. Despite her disliking Liesel in the beginning, she was there to feed, bathe and take care of Liesel. The soothing atmosphere of the Hubermanns provided her with a safe physical environment. She started her school and began to help Rosa with her business and this rekindled her relationship with faith. When Rosa became her saviour (providing for her physical needs), Hans's comforting hands nurtured her emotional wounds. He guided her through her emotional confusion and chaos that led to her recovery. He was always there for her and she learned her greatest lesson in his comfort.

When Liesel witnessed her brother's death, she kept denying reality. She was not ready to believe or accept what had happened and kept resisting the truth. She refused to listen to the representatives of foster care. She was staring outside the window and was lost in herself. Inside her mind, she was drawing a circle of protection that shrinks her presence into her body. She refused to get down from the car when they reached the Hubermanns and it was Hans's power to reach over her fear that led her to this new life. His quiet personality and soothing voice silenced her fear and frustration.

During the period of her constant nightmares, he was always there to guide and comfort her. For the first few months, Liesel had the vision of her brother's death disturbing her sleep and during those nights, Hans assured her of his presence. He remained with her throughout the night and provided her with the protection that she desperately needed. In the beginning, Liesel feared that Hans will eventually leave her like her mother but his consistency proved her wrong. Hans was able to win over her trust and she developed a strong feeling that he will be there for her. This assurance and safety led to the first breakthrough in her traumatic rut. Hans's presence became her ground of safety. Hans played his accordion to soothe her back to life. She saw his accordion as the symbol of safety. At the beginning of the novel, Liesel expressed that her safety ended with the sunset due to her encounter with death, Liesel had already developed a fear of darkness (darkness is associated with death) and at this time, Hans tampered her with his music. She gradually found her peace with Hans and his accordion amidst all the chaos.

As a victim of trauma, Liesel had lost her identity and had constantly failed to refer to it. In order to empower herself, along with her attempt to seek safety in her surrounding she must also learn to rekindle with herself as she had lost faith in herself. She needs to trust herself as the second step toward her recovery. She chooses to build her self-worth through the eyes of others despite all her failed attempts in isolation. She lacked a definite set of language to define herself. She began to look for others to define and complete her. She started to learn a lot about herself from her close community. They provided her with a strong perspective toward self-empowerment. They carried their own sense of trauma that she could relate to and it left her with a hope of recovery. According to Herman, if a victim succeeds to define her identity and name her suffering, this will help her to recognize other victims. And it will assure the victim that they are not alone in this journey. Their story of recovery will provide them with the hope of survival. In the case of Liesel, she was not able to identify herself as a trauma victim. Ilsa Hermann, Max Vandenburg, and Hans Hubermann are three major characters in her story. Each of them suffers from their own loss and provided her varying trace of hope.

One of her close bonds to recovery was Ilsa Hermann. Ilsa enters Liesel's life during the night of the Book Burning ceremony. This is a straight reference to the book-burning ceremony conducted in the history of Nazi Germany. It was Hitler's birthday. On this particular day the youth of Germany, especially children were taken to the town square. Liesel and Ruby, her best friend was also forced to attend this book-burning

event. And this led to her realization that her family was murdered by Hitler because they were communists. During the book burning ceremony, millions of books especially written by Jewish writers and works they considered anti-German were burned into ashes. These were burned with a clear intention that these books are not supposed to be read by any citizen of Germany. During this occasion, Liesel steals her second novel (from the pyre) and Ilsa happens to witness it.

Ilsa Hermann was the Mayor's wife and was often mistaken as an arrogant woman. Ilsa, on the other hand, was a victim of her own life. She lost her son during the First World War and was left behind in that darkness. She is another character in this novel that denies claiming her identity as a survivor. She considered herself responsible for her son's death and that guilt shadowed her character with a brooding silence. It was Ilsa who opened the world of books for Liesel. She gave Liesel access to their library. Though Ilsa provided her with the path to empowerment, she failed to use that herself.

Liesel was fascinated by Ilsa's character in beginning but later realize that the entire library stands for the memory of her lost son. Liesel discovers a book with his (Ilsa's son's) name scribbled on it. Gradually Liesel unearths the self-punishing nature of Ilsa. She punished herself for her loss. Though Ilsa's character doesn't provide her with a positive picture, it gives Liesel an idea about a potential future that she doesn't want for herself. Ilsa's life pushes her towards empowerment. Even though she let her into their library, Liesel couldn't shrug off the cold feeling with a familiar sense of grief in the atmosphere. Ilsa never came to terms with her loss. Liesel realizes that either one can suffer like Ilsa or can harmonize with their past. She saw herself in the place of Ilsa unless she learns to accept the loss of her family. Ilsa is unconsciously teaching Liesel to take responsibility for her actions so that she can avoid a painful future like hers. Ilsa constantly stares at Liesel during her visits to her library and this gives Liesel a sensation of her own identity. According to Lacan's mirror stage theory, one gets aware of their identity when placed under their reflection (mirror stage development), and in often cases it takes place in the reflection of a mother's gaze. Ilsa's stare makes Liesel aware of her individuality and throws light on her action. This transforms Liesel's suffering into a pang of guilt for not initiating a change in herself. The stare enforced her to take responsibility for her future. Through this action, Ilsa empowers her to act differently to avoid a miserable future.

Max Vandenburg is the following character in the column that had made an impression on the life of the Protagonist. Max is the Jewish German in the novel and when he first enters Himmel Street, he holds a dread of a Jew in Nazi Germany alongside the survivor's blame. During Kristallnacht, he had to forsake his family at his mother's request. With the assistance of his cherished companion, Max leaves his town and takes shelter in Hubermanns. During the period in the First World War, Hans Hubermann happens to befriend Erik Vandenberg, a German Jew, who later spares his life. Max reaches the doorsteps of Hubermann with the fear to be hunted and executed by Nazi German. He develops an extreme trauma out of his experience and Liesel once again finds a soul that resonates with hers.

At the point when Max initially shows up, Liesel fears his strange nearness. While Max dozes in the additional bed in her room, Liesel watches him in trepidation. This fear and dread stem from the fact that Max is a stranger; but more or less, she is excited by the bits of herself that she finds in him. Liesel also experienced nightmares during the peak of her trauma. This made it easy for her to understand him as she was able to recognize the agony buried inside him. She experiences a sense of happiness when she realized that she is not alone in this journey.

As her dread of Max softens into recognition, she experiences an urge to connect with him but restrains to approach him. She was aware of the fact that he was a threat to her family but yet she saw hope in him. She perceives and comprehends the risk of the Jew under her roof; however, she also realizes that it is inappropriate to send him onto the road to battle for his life. She experiences a dichotomy within herself. So as to overcome her disarrays, she realizes that she must learn to trust herself in making this moral judgment. On her thirteenth birthday celebration, as a notion of kinship, she reluctantly embraces him and this caused him to acknowledge their shared characteristic. As a return to her gesture, he decides to gift her with a book as he knew her love for reading. This act, in turn, helped her to be more empathetic. By the time she finishes the book, she develops a strong connection with him which is only possible with like-minded people. She was able to look past his identity as a Jew and saw a friend in him. When she returns to the basement to express her gratitude, she experiences a safety near him that she even falls asleep there without any fear.

This friendship taught her to take a gander at people with more sympathy and love. It also empowered her to trust herself in making decisions. Max taught her the value of human life. She was able to look past the barriers of race and religion. She saw a strong mind in Max, who never accepted his defeat. She realizes that she is no more a victim who must hide in a corner. He made her realize her power to take action and trust herself.

Another significant influence in her life is Hans Hubermann, her foster father. In spite of the assurance that he offers, he also assumes an important role in her journey to empowerment. Hans was a person who had carried his share of suffering throughout his life without letting it control him. He educates her on the importance of words to recuperate and save her life. He unravels his story of survival and set himself as a model. She later learns to rebuild her narrative through his lesson.

After the ground breaking book-burning occasion in the town square, Liesel looks for affirmation of her victimhood. While Death takes her sibling, he (death as the narrator) declares Hitler responsible for that. When she realized that her family was killed because of Hitler, she goes to Hans for a proper explanation. But rather than denying the reality, he remains honest with her and confirms her suspicion. He holds his calm composure throughout the novel which made it easy for her to break through her fear. He resists confronting her with another lie and this exposed her to the reality of her loss. He indirectly labelled her as a victim which helped her to name her inner conflict. This allowed Liesel to accept her state of mind which later led to her empowerment.

Once she realized that she was a victim, she declares her hatred toward Hitler. She bore him responsible for taking away her identity (due to the loss of her brother and mother). She succeeded in recognizing the evil that victimized her. As an act of resistance, she decides to steal a book from the pyre and saw it as a reminder of the injustice that she was exposed to. This helped her to anchor her overwhelming emotions. Though she reaches out to books as her solace, it wouldn't have been possible without the reading lessons of Hans Hubermann. His reading lessons enable Liesel to forsake her victimhood and promise a way to survive. He discovers her book thievery when he happened to see *The Gravedigger's Handbook* under her pillow and he offers to teach her to read.

Gradually as their friendship bloomed, he confided in Liesel about his traumatic past. During his period in the First World War, he happens to be friends, with Erik Vandenburg, a Jewish German. It was Erik Vandenburg who taught him to play the accordion. Neither of them was interested in the war. But soon Erik Vandenburg was killed and Hans was the only survivor because on that day he didn't go to the battle. He was made to stay behind to dictate letters because of Erik and that day everyone died in the battle and Hans returned with the survivor's guilt. It was because of his Jewish friend and his knowledge to read and write that spared his life. She was left with hope when she learned about the traumatic life of her father and his recovery. She saw a possibility for her own recovery.

Rudy Steiner is another important character that helped her to trust her surroundings. When Liesel took up a fight with the local boys, Steiner stood by her side which ignited their friendship. She felt security in his companionship. She began to blindly trust him and she even opens up about Max's presence in their house. He taught her the importance of friendship and he walked with her through her struggle.

The journey of her recovery begins with a solid community for her support. She begins her expedition as a traumatized victim who failed to connect with herself. Through the help of her safe surroundings, she was able to gradually progress in her attempt to recuperate her suffering. Hans Hubermanns plays the most significant role in her life. He was able to tamper with her fear and empowered her with the knowledge of words that later saved her.

IV. Conclusion

The *Book Thief* is a novel written by Markus Zusak that attempts to reconstruct the communal memories of the Holocaust. This novel depicts the story of Liesel Meminger and her venture to survive the encounter with death and isolation. The nine-year-old Liesel Meminger is abandoned by her mother immediately after her younger brother's death. This traumatic experience created a deep impression in the mind of the protagonist that isolate her from the world.

The novel begins with the tragic death of Liesel's brother and ends with the catastrophe that strikes Himmel Street. The novel takes us through the traumatic childhood of the protagonist and her encounter with death, against the background of the Second World War. Though she seeks constant grounding in this continuous destruction, her traumatic experience shoves her into the path of incertitude. Narrated from the perception of death, this novel speaks for the traumatized. Death as the personified narrator becomes the voice for Liesel during her extreme encounter with the agony that forced her to succumb to silence. Death takes up different roles in this novel. Some instances in the novel put forth death as the saviour and others as the voice for the dying soul. But most importantly, death stands as the initiator of Liesel's traumatic experiences. The abandonment by her mother immediately after the demise of her brother acts as the pivotal factor that results in her traumatic childhood. Her mother sends her off to the foster family with the pure intention of protecting her, but Liesel experiences a traumatic shock when she finds herself in an unknown surrounding following

the loss of her brother. Later when she was adopted by the Hubermanns. Despite the isolation she experiences from her real family (mother), death also isolates her from her own identity.

Due to her traumatic encounters, Liesel goes through post-traumatic stress disorder. She experiences hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. As a victim of trauma, she gradually develops hyperarousal due to their anticipation of sudden danger. Now as she is aware of her mortality, it enhances her fear of danger. Even in the care of Hubermanns, she is anticipating danger though the journey promises her safety. Liesel suffers from nightmares and flashbacks of her brother's death. Later, when she was forced to face reality, she goes through constriction and completely shutdowns. These traits justify the character of Liesel Meminger as a trauma victim.

Relationships play the most significant role in the life of the protagonist as it remains the sole reason that led to her recovery. Being a victim of trauma due to her encounter with death and abandonment by her mother, Liesel withdraws herself into silence. She fails to connect with others due to her lack of faith in herself. But it's her relationship with Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, and Ilsa Hermann that helps her to recover and break away from her past. With her life, as an illustration, Ilsa Hermann made Liesel realize the consequences of victimhood. Ilsa was a victim herself as she couldn't recover from her son's loss. She kept blaming herself and claimed her responsible for his death. The guilt that she experienced foreshadowed her life. This made Liesel aware of the possible outcome of her future if she fails to recover from trauma. Max Vandenburg taught her to be more compassionate to others which ultimately helped her to empathize with herself. She was able to associate with his circumstances which made it easy for her to channel her emotions. Max is considered a strong character in the novel as he kept fighting injustice. This influenced Liesel to take responsibility for her actions. He made her believe her own decision and this helped her to reconnect with her lost self. Hans Hubermann is the most important character in the novel. He empowered her with the key (of literature) that ultimately led to her recovery. He was able to provide her with a safe space and assured her of his protection. He remained patient with her throughout her journey. When she encountered death and isolation, it stripped her of her personal narrative. She failed to process reality and kept denying it. Hans Hubermann taught her to read and write which helped her to reconstruct her past in such a way that she can process and understand it. It helped her to rewrite her identity from a victim to a survivor. Without a proper community, she wouldn't have survived her actuality. It empowered her to recover.

The Book Thief encapsulates the significance of the community in the wake of a traumatic occasion. Considering the Holocaust's outrage, survivors may battle to believe in humanity, breaking from the community and denying to reconnect. In her case, when Liesel loses everything, her family, belief, security, and identity, she still tries to revamp her belief in herself and those around her. Whereas Liesel battles with this development of belief, she overcomes her fear of communicating with the characters around her. Hence, she finds security in their presence and strength from their stories. For this reason, her story personalizes the meaning of the community within the recovery handle. In spite of the fact that Liesel grieves the passing of her brother and the misfortune of her mother, she finds life in her community.

As the last touch to her recuperation, Liesel chooses to end up as the voice for the traumatized. She wrote about their story with the hope to carry that around the world and through the next generations. She needed the world to listen to the stories of their battle and survival. She considered it her moral commitment to the people around her. Liesel's traumatic encounter and recuperation affirm the profundity with which The Book Thief respects and recalls the dead. She acknowledges her misfortunes and recognizes that by living her life to the fullest, she can best honour the passing of her adored ones. Liesel carries their memory for the rest of her life. Even when she dies, death makes a passive note that in her final vision (before she died) she saw her children, grandchildren, spouse, and everyone associated with her life. As the last touch to her recuperation, Liesel chooses to end up as the voice for the traumatized.

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