

Innocence Amidst Chaos: The Impact of War on Children

Dissertation submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, in partial fulfillment for the award of B.A. degree in English Language and Literature.



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## Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Innocence Amidst Chaos: The Impact of War on Children** is a bona fide record of sincere work done by, Fathima E B, 210021000936, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature under the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam during the year 2023-2024.

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## Declaration

I, hereby declare that the presented dissertation **Innocence Amidst Chaos: The Impact of War on Children** is based on the research that I did under the supervision and guidance of Ms. Smitha Elizabeth George, Guest Faculty, Research Centre and Postgraduate Department of English, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. This is a report of my work based on the research done on the selected topic and it is my original work and interpretations drawn therein are based on material collected by myself. It has not been previously formed basis for the award of any degree, diploma or fellowship or other similar title or recognition.

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## Chapter 1

### Childhood in the Shadow of War: An Introductory Perspective

War being a perennial part of history, left unfading and lasting effects on society as well as individuals. Its horrifying consequences are mostly inflicted on children. In this scenario, children's literature that involves war as its context and children being the protagonists serves the readers, especially the young readers, an understanding of the sad and excruciating realities of war and leads them toward a peaceful and safe future where they grow empathy and humanity towards their fellow beings. This study aims to analyse the similarities in the psychological and physical aspects of children, who are affected by the catastrophe of war, with the help of trauma theory. The works that are taken for this analysis are *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serrailier and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Both novels are set against the backdrop of the Second World War in Germany. These works involve children who get stuck in the mayhem and unrest of war.

Ian Serrailier is an English novelist and poet who is best known for his children's book, especially *The Silver Sword*, which was published in 1956. Set back in the Second World War in Germany, the novel portrays three Polish siblings Ruth, Edek, and Bronia and an orphaned boy Jan, who are obligated to travel through war-ravaged Europe in search of their parents, whom they believe to be in Switzerland. The hazardous journey they take is full of uncertainties and surprises where they face hurdles, they have to take care of, find unexpected friendships, and help from unfamiliar people. All four children, who are teenagers, are forced to act more like adults to overcome the obstacles they encounter. Amidst the difficulties, the four children stand together as one and speak for each other, which symbolizes their courage and companionship even during the hard times.

It took Serrailier five years to complete *The Silver Sword*. He had to do a lot of research for his book. Jane Serrailier Grossfled, his daughter, states,

“Sellotaped inside the plot-book are cuttings from magazines like Quaker Publication *The Friend*, which tell of the ruined cities of Europe, of children who jumped the trucks of goods trains to steal food, ‘cellar-dwellers’ and children who, like Bronia, drew whatever they saw around them” (Grossfled 177).

Serrailier was known to be a pacifist and a Quaker. He admitted that *The Silver Sword* was not meant to glorify war, but to show the harsh realities of war and to portray the long-term effects of war and trauma on children.

*The Silver Sword* was not immediately popular. However, when a *Junior Bookshelf* review came out praising that it was touched with greatness, Serrailier realized the worth of his work (Grossfled 192). *The Silver Sword* was chosen as runner-up for the prestigious Carnegie Medal. It was stated that unlike the other children’s books, where children were safeguarded from the brutal circumstances of war and conflicts, *The Silver Sword* has young protagonists, who are confronted with unfortunate and difficult situations during wartime. *The Silver Sword* has been taught in many American and Australian schools. Even though it targets at 11-16 age group, it gravitates more towards adults. Many readers state that, reading it was one of the most memorable experiences of their childhood. Julia Hope observes that *The Silver Sword* was concerned about its appropriateness for young readers, for its unwavering portrayal of war during its first publication. However, for over sixty years, it has been considered as a literature for children which discusses the havoc and trauma caused on children by war and political unrest. Julia Hope further opines that the book promotes: “citizenship, tolerance, respect and integration as well as the enduring nature of human spirits in the face of terrible circumstances” (Hope 296).

Jane Serrailier remarks that Ian Serrailier was often asked to talk to school children who were studying *The Silver Sword*. “He gave them a slideshow of the sources he had used writing the book. He always ended with this photograph from Unesco publication *Children of Europe* and the words ‘No child should ever again have that expression on his face’” (Grossfled 193).

Markus Zusak, an Australian writer, is best known for his international bestseller *The Book Thief*, which was published in 2006. Liesel Meminger, a young girl, is the protagonist of this historical fiction novel. She is brought into a German household after her brother’s death and her mother’s will to give her away. Her father was taken away by the Nazi troops for him being a communist. As the title suggests, Liesel is the thief who steals books even in the most dangerous situations. Set in Nazi Germany during the Second World War and Holocaust, Liesel's adventures are narrated by Death, which brings uniqueness to the novel. Liesel's friendship with Rudy Steiner, her neighbour boy, and the love and care from her foster parents, especially Hans Hubermann, her father, Liesel, leads a normal life even though she struggles with internal conflicts. When her foster parents hide Max, a Jewish fist-fighter in their home, Liesel's life turns upside down. With the powerful narration by Death, *The Book Thief* gives the readers an insight to lives and miseries of people, who are tied to the knots of ongoing war.

Zusak took three years to finish his novel. Zusak also did a lot of research to complete the book. It was Zusak’s Austrian father and German mother who inspired him to write the book. Their childhood stories enlightened him.

“For my siblings and me, when we heard those stories, it was like a piece of Europe entered our kitchen. We were shown a world of bombs and ice and fire. We were told kids boycotting Hitler Youth meetings, and mothers and fathers who refused to fly the Nazi flag. We heard about boys who were whipped for



giving bread to Jewish people and other so-called criminals, as they were marched through the streets of their town – and the way those people thanked them” (Zusak 587).

The book was critically praised for its unique narration and usage of illustrations. With over 500 pages, *The Book Thief* won several awards including Publishers Weekly Best Children’s Book of the Year in 2006. The book was also adapted into a feature film with the same title, which was released in 2013.

The primary concerns of trauma studies are psychological trauma, how it is represented in language, and how memory shapes both individual and cultural identities. Through an analysis of its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural importance, trauma studies investigate the effects of trauma on literature and society. When trauma studies first emerged in 1990s, they were based on Freudian Theory.

Children who are impacted by war and conflicts suffer greatly from mental issues. The children who are directly exposed to traumatic war experiences, suffer from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the two most prevalent mental illness in the wake of conflict. According to Save the Children 2021, 452 million young kids globally or one in six live in a conflict zone and 1.7 billion children live in nation affected by violence (Hazer and Gustaf 1). Trauma theory related to war mainly emphasize on the psychological effects of wartime events on children’s growth and well-being. Through an understanding of how war trauma affects children’s psychological health and developmental path, humanitarians can strive to support recovery, resilience, and healing in impacted communities.

This study is divided into five chapters. An introduction to the authors and their respective works as well as the theory is given in this chapter. The trauma theory, which looks

into the long-term impacts of disaster, political upheaval, and displacement is covered in the second chapter. The third chapter examines post traumatic effects of war on the characters of *The Silver Sword*- Ruth, Edek, Bronia, and Jan. In chapter four, Liesel Meminger, the main character and her friend Rudy Steiner in *The Book Thief* are analysed on the basis of trauma. Chapter five aims to find the similarities in the physical and psychological aspects of the characters from *The Silver Sword* and *The Book Thief* and how trauma is manifested in them.

## Chapter 2

### War-Induced Trauma

Trauma is the Greek word for “wound”. Although the Greeks used the term only for physical injuries, nowadays trauma is just as likely to refer to emotional wounds (“Trauma”). It is employed for emphasizing psychological or emotional concepts. Trauma is a ubiquitous problem. It is the outcome of being exposed to an emotionally distressing or possibly life-threatening incident or sequence of events. It has long lasting negative consequences on individuals’ physical, social as well as psychological well-being. “The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences” (Van der Kolk 12). Events such as childhood neglect, abrupt loss of loved ones, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, oppression, violence, and displacement in a community ravaged by war can all be considered traumatic.

Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, significantly advanced the knowledge of trauma through the formulation of psychoanalytic theory. The notion of hysteria was first investigated at the Paris Hospital, La Salpêtrière, with the French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot, who Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet studied with in the 1880s. This marked the beginning of the first ever analysis of trauma. A concept that Freud proposed was what he termed as “Nachträglichkeit” (Breuer and Freud 278), often known as memory transcription. But Freud did not present it so deeply as to theorize it. It was Jean Laplanche, who explained it as the concept of “afterwardsness” in his “theory of general seduction” (Laplanche 112). Overtime, Freud’s theories regarding trauma changed, but a few fundamental principles arose that served as the foundation for trauma.

The unconscious mind may suppress painful memories as a protective strategy against extreme sufferings. Freud believed that, traumatic memories are repressed and only become trauma through delayed action and these suppressed memories would re-emerge at a later age, causing symptoms like anxiety, phobias, and neurotic behaviours to manifest. Freud also investigated the connection between neurosis and trauma, putting forward the theory that unresolved trauma may play a role in the emergence of psychiatric diseases. According to Jean-Michel Quinodoz, “he (Freud) elaborates on the idea of *deferred action*: the pathogenic effect of a traumatic event occurring in childhood may be manifested not at the time it actually took place, but retrospectively when the child reaches a subsequent phase of sexual development (puberty, adolescence)” (Quinodoz 34). Breuer and Freud claimed that, the victim of a traumatic incident only understands the traumatic ramifications of the incident after a period of time, and the victim is haunted by that trauma when recalling or confronting it for the second time (Breuer & Freud 261). Since then, the “deferred action” mentioned in trauma theory has been studied and discussed by many researchers.

The modern trauma studies began to emerge around 1980. In this year, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), which recognised PTSD as a psychological disorder. Later, in her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence-From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* published in 1992, Judith Lewis Herman, a renowned psychiatrist, attempted to integrate additional forms of trauma brought on by domestic and sexual abuse, terrorism and war. From that point on, modern trauma studies have taken a more comprehensive approach to trauma and PTSD, addressing traumatic experiences of all kinds including war and terrorist attacks and sexual and domestic violence. Whilst trauma may occur at any age, it has

particularly serious long-term consequences on children. This chapter explores the trauma caused by the impact of war on children.

Children who are confronted to war suffer physical as well as psychological injuries. They run a significant physical danger of getting wounded by explosives, becoming disfigured, or losing parts of their body during warfare. Food supply and other necessities are hindered in a war-torn country. Consequently, children undergo malnutrition as a result of being deprived of vital nutrients. This causes them many illnesses, most of which are communicable, such as diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, and measles. Due to the collapse of sanitary infrastructure and health care system, medical assistance for these ailments may not be available for everyone. Health hazards are further increased by poor hygiene habits and lack of access of clean water. Displacement, or being compelled to move out of their native land and settle somewhere else is yet another challenge that children deal with. This exposes them to the challenging conditions with which they are unlikely able to overcome. They are more vulnerable to illness, starvation and insufficient medical intervention in those scenarios.

Within the psychological context, children, who are exposed to war, violence, trauma, and evacuation conditions, may exhibit a variety of potential negative and stress reactions which might include, particular anxieties, sadness, anger, sorrow, completely reliant behavioural patterns, continuous breaking down, lack of interest in everything around them, and psychosomatic illnesses. “Children exposed to war manifest a higher rate of mental disorders compared with children in the general population, although prevalence data are inconsistent and likely depend on the nature of the trauma, the duration of exposure, diagnostic criteria used, and cultural discrepancies” (Liu 3). One of the major disorders is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The symptoms of PTSD in children include inability to sleep, wetting the bed after

acquiring toilet skills, losing the ability to speak or forgetting how to speak, playfully enacting the terrifying incident, showing excessive attachment to a parent or other adult, experiencing persistently bad feelings like fear, rage, guilt, or shame, having recurrent visions or memories of the incident.

Children often lose one or both of their parents during times of conflict. There are persistent detrimental impacts of parent-child detachment on child's mental health, wellness, and social growth. The loss of safe environments to stay during a flight from hazardous circumstance is another serious issue, leading to a great deal of sustained stress. Children who are exposed to war are therefore, robbed of their safety on several layers; from the personal sense of security that comes with being separated from family and friends to the physical distance of their homes, and occasionally even their nations.

However, children, who are exposed to conflicts frequently, show phenomenal resilience and acquire coping strategies to get by despite the tremendous issues they experience. They retain a positive state of mind, use appropriate coping mechanisms, and find purpose in hardship. Their resilience is further strengthened by cultural and spiritual resources, a sense of agency and access to education. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically analyse the traumatic effects of war on the characters in the works, *The Silver Sword* and *The Book Thief* using trauma theory as a guide.

## Chapter 3

### Fractured Bonds: Trauma and Connection in *The Silver Sword*

Ian Serraillier's *The Silver Sword* is a moving account of a Polish family ripped apart by the Second World War. Joseph Balicki, a primary school headmaster and his Swiss wife Margrit lives in a Warsaw suburb with their three children, eleven-year-old Ruth, seven-year-old Edek, and three-year -old Bronia. In early 1940, Joseph is taken away and imprisoned by Nazis.

Without the protection of their father, the three children live in fear and despair and it gets even worse when the mother is taken away by the Nazi soldiers to somewhere which was unknown to them. They narrowly escape the explosion in a terrifying scramble across the rooftops. When Joseph escapes the prison, he returns to Warsaw only to find rubble instead of his home. He then meets Jan, a ragged orphan boy, to whom he asks about his children. Realising Jan is unable to help him, Joseph gives him a silver sword, which he had once gifted his wife. He asks Jan to tell his children (if he ever finds them), about their meeting, that he is going to Switzerland in search of his wife and to follow him as soon as they can. The boy promises to do so and Joseph leaves to Switzerland.

Eventually, Jan meets the Balickis and Ruth immediately recognises the silver sword which belonged to her father. Jan tells her about their father going to Switzerland and soon the children decide to take the epic journey across the war-torn Europe in search of their parents and the silver sword becomes the symbol of their hope. Jan also accompanies them. They travel from Warsaw to Switzerland through Russian, American, and French zones. They encounter many incidents which are strange and unexpected during their journey. The novel has a happy ending where the children finally reach Switzerland with the help of many kind people and reunite with

their parents. Jan, who was an orphan and had nowhere to go, finally finds a family, takes the name of Balicki and lives with them.

Now, analysis of each character can be done with the help of trauma theory. Ruth was the eldest among the children. She was eleven when her father was abducted and imprisoned. Great responsibilities were assigned to her after her mother was taken away. When Edek, fires against a van, which belonged to Nazi troop in response to tearing their mother away from them, Ruth is terrified. But for her, there is no time to panic. So, she tries to be courageous and calms her little sister Bronia.

After a lot of struggles, she manages to escape the explosion and eventually settles in a cellar at the other end of the city and then in the woods outside the city, with her siblings. For Ruth, it was not easy for her to take responsibility. But she gradually learns it. She becomes a mother figure to Bronia and encourages her to draw pictures in the cellar wall. Ruth is also anxious about her brother Edek smuggling food supplies. But she fails to correct him since food was not easy to get that time. She starts a school with few children and teaches them The Bible. For her, Edek was their only life-line and when he gets caught for smuggling and is taken away, Ruth is devastated. She realises that, now her little sister completely relies upon her and it was her duty to fend for them. Later, she meets Jan and soon, she decides to leave for Switzerland. She continuously enquires about her lost brother to the authorities but all in vain. She is further more distressed to see old men, women, and children among the refugees on their journey and feels pity for them. She could not find a glimpse of hope in their face.

When they settle in the village of Kolina for a while, Ruth is not expected to witness the chaotic event to be taken place, where everyone (most of them children) fighting for food. Even Jan is there in the fighting scrum and she gets involved in it not for food, but to save Bronia from



it. She gets injured and is unable to move or to turn her head. Even in the middle of that she desperately tries to hold on for a piece of food. When Edek is contracted with tuberculosis, Ruth is afraid that he will not make it to Switzerland and does everything she could do to keep him alive. Ruth is the only one who can control Jan, who behaves so rude to the elders and the reason behind most of their problems. When Jan loses the silver sword on their way, Ruth, who had strong faith in their salvation becomes dreadful and feels alone than ever. When the children get trapped in a storm before their meeting with Joseph, Ruth, who always remained calm and hopeful, loses her control and yells at Jan for his reckless and selfish acts. Towards the end, when she meets her parents after escaping from the raging storm, she is unable to speak or form words to address her father. Throughout the novel, Ruth remains brave, wise and unselfish even in the most gruesome circumstances.

Edek was twelve years old when his mother was torn apart from him. Since he was a member of Boys' Rifle Brigade, he owned a rifle, which was loaded, and shoots a soldier in the arm and punctures the wheel of the van in which his mother was carried away. It is Edek who carries Bronia while they try to escape through the rooftops. When they make their new home in a cellar, Edek makes them beds, tables and chairs. He steals blankets for them from Nazi supply dump to survive winter. Since Edek had no ration card, he gets deprived of enough food. He becomes unable to apply for one since it will disclose his age. Boys who were twelve years were to go to Germany for slave work and Edek hence refuses to do so. So, he often steals food from Nazis or scrounged from their garbage bins.

In addition to this, Edek smuggles food commodities. He is well aware of the consequences if he gets caught. But hunger gives him no choice. Unfortunately, he gets caught for smuggling cheese to Warsaw and is sent away to Germany as a slave. He spends nearly two

years over there suffering so much hardships. He tries to run away but fails. It is when the war turns against Nazis that he succeeds in escaping from there. He hides under a train and reaches Poland. That journey is not easy for him and all he thinks is about his sisters, Ruth and Bronia. When he comes back, he looks as if he had been tortured in Germany.

Edek gets more exhausted on their journey to Switzerland. He struggles with tuberculosis. "At night, as they lay under the bright stars, his cough would keep Ruth awake and she could not throw off her anxiety. Each day his walking became slower and more painful" (Serrailier, 93). When the Burgomaster they meet orders them to go back to Poland, Edek refuses and becomes cathartic, confessing how much he hates Nazis. He explains the sufferings he had endured for months in Germany during war. He is determined to continue their journey and tries to escape without the Burgomaster's notice, with the help of a Bavarian farmer. Edek's condition gets worse day by day.

In Switzerland, they take refuge in a camp where Edek is provided medical assistance. He gets isolated and stuck in a storm, faints and drowns in a stream with water nearly up to his neck just before his reunion with Joseph. When he is rescued and given medical aid, he is pale white and lies still and straight as a post. Even after his meeting with his parents, Edek suffers the most than anyone else. He is sent away to a sanatorium. After eighteen months of struggle and fighting, he survives, returns home and starts to adjust to his new life with his family.

Next character is Bronia. Bronia was a toddler when her parents were separated from her. So Bronia looks upon Ruth as a guardian. The night when her mother is taken away and Edek fires at the Nazis, Bronia howls and sobs uncontrollably and she is speechless with terror. Bronia loved drawing and when Ruth encourages her to draw pictures on the cellar walls, all she draws is the pictures of people queuing for food and children playing among ruins. On their first stage

of journey, Bronia is forced to walk on her feet for a long distance with Ruth and Jan, which blisters her feet. Bronia witnesses the fighting scum for food among children and is saved from it by a cook, as she was the smallest among them. Bronia often complains about not having enough comfort while travelling, but when Ruth reminds her about their ultimate goal, she endures the sufferings. When Edek is exhausted with tuberculosis, Bronia helps Ruth to look after him. It is Bronia who asks Joe Wolski to take them to Switzerland. During the storm, Bronia is baffled and horrified, but believes in Ruth and clings to hope.

After her reunion with her parents, she is the quickest to settle with her new life. She was too young to remember happier days. But she grows up as happy and gifted child. However, the recurrent traumatic memories haunt her and it is manifested in her drawings even after things get back to normal. But gradually it changes and her drawings reflect her peaceful life among the mountains of Switzerland. Even as a toddler, Bronia shows exceptional courage and maturity throughout the novel.

Jan is the fourth and final character to be analysed. He is an orphan. Among the four children, he is a bit aggressive and arrogant in nature. He meets Joseph and pickpockets him. Jan has a wooden box that he carries all the time under his arm and he never opens it in front of anyone. He considers it as a treasure. He has a special bond towards animals and he pets a kitten, a cock, a chimpanzee and a dog in the novel. He gives them all unusual names and considers them as his relatives. He is rude and mean towards elders and is spiteful towards Edek. The only one he cares is Ruth, to whom he listens and obeys. For him, she is his mother and guardian. He loves to fight and steal and never feels any guilt for stealing. He resents Nazis and Germans and steals from them as a revenge. He once remarks, "The Nazis stole everything from our country and left us with nothing. Now it is our turn to steal from them" (Serrailier 104). When he loses

the silver sword, he leaves the Balicki children and goes back to retrieve it. It is Joe Wolski, who finds him again and Jan, who was determined to get the silver sword back, attacks him. So Wolski trusses him up and locks in the back of his truck. When Joe tries to talk to him, Jan kicks and spits at him which stops only after Ruth pleads him. When he sees the Swiss Mountains after a long time of witnessing ruined buildings and warzones, he becomes hysterical and bursts into tears. When he is trapped in the storm, he only thinks about saving the dog, Ludwig. When Ruth accuses him for his selfishness, he starts thinking and turns towards his friends. While rescuing Edek, he loses his wooden box, but instead of getting shattered, he proudly announces his loss and reveals what all things were inside it (trivial things like cat's claws, buttons, pen nib, silver teaspoon, feather and three dead fleas).

After the reunion of the Balickis, Jan finds a family and lives as a Balicki. However, Jan is not settled with his new life as everyone else. "During the war, his mind had suffered more than his body, and minds usually take longer to heal. He did not take easily to a secure and peaceful life. He was excitable and could not concentrate on one thing for long" (Serraillier 175). He plays firing squads, crosses frontiers secretly and smuggles. He always fights and steals, even though he had all food and clothes he needed, from houses especially German houses since he loathed them and could not forgive them for what they had done to Poland. Nobody was able to control him except Ruth and he remains devoted to her. Ruth helps him to rear some rabbits and goats for his love towards animals. Eventually, he grows up leaving all his bad ways and becomes a better version of himself.

When the characters are analysed in the light of trauma theory, everyone has physical and psychological manifestations of trauma after confronting the war. Ruth as a child is obliged to take the responsibility as a guardian which is strange to her. Circumstances make her act more

like an adult in which she mostly succeeds and acts mature throughout the novel. She represses all the traumatic events she encountered in order to survive with her little sister and brother. She keeps herself busy by teaching children so that she does not have to think about the bitter incidents.

Throughout the journey, she is physically injured but the silver sword gives her hope and she clings to it. She feels loneliness and helplessness when that silver sword is lost and Jan leaves her to get it back. With her tuberculosis-stricken brother and an innocent five-year little sister, Ruth battles the inner conflicts and uncertainties in her life. All her repressed emotions re-emerge in the storm scene where she accuses Jan for his reckless behaviour and selfishness. She shouts and yells at him and after she is rescued from the storm and meets her father, she becomes insane calling out for her siblings and Jan. It takes a long time for her to adjust to the situation. When her father makes arrangements for her to go to a university for teacher training (which was her ambition), she refuses to go soon because she is not ready to leave them. She behaves like a child wanting to live in her lost childhood days. “She behaved like a young child, clinging to her mother and following her about everywhere. It seemed as she were trying to recover the lost years of her childhood” (Serrailier 176).

Edek, due to the lack of secure shelter and hunger is forced to steal and smuggle. Even though he knows it is not right to steal, he does not have any choice. He is caught for smuggling and sent to Germany as a slave worker for more than a year. Working there as a child becomes a haunting memory for him and he explains it to his siblings with so much pain. Mark, a British officer describes him, “Edek is brave and intelligent and looks as if he had suffered a lot – he spent nearly two years slaving for the Nazis. You can see it in his face – a kid’s face ought not be creased and pinched like his” (Serrailier, 86). As a boy of twelve years, he is given a loaded rifle

by the authorities instead of a toy. In such a tender age, Edek confronts war and weapons. Edek is also stricken by tuberculosis and he does not get proper medical assistance at first. He himself believes that he is not going to make it to Switzerland. But he also looks at the silver sword and builds hope. Even after his reunion with his parents, Edek is not able to cope up with his new life. He fights for eighteen months and his strong will to live helps him survive.

Bronia's traumatic memories are as mentioned earlier, are manifested in her drawings. "At first, she could draw only the scenes of war and escape which she had lived through. Her pictures were full of soldiers, ruined buildings, open railway trucks, and queue outside the soup kitchens" (Serraillier, 174). As a little girl, she is not able to remember the earlier days before the outburst of war. She does not understand or realise the intensity of war, as she plays 'Air – Raid Alert' with other children where one would cry 'Alert!' and count up to fifty while the other run, find shelter and hide. When he shouts 'Stop!' the one who had not hid has to lie down and pretend to be dead. These games are the reality they witness and they playfully enact those incidents without any realisation. As a child, Bronia is able to overcome the traumatic incidents very quickly other than anyone else.

Among the children, Jan is the one who is mostly affected by the war. As an orphan, he does not have anyone to rely upon. So, he becomes fond of animals and considers them as his family. When Captain Greenwood asks him about his parents, he says that his grey cat and Jimpy, his cock were his parents and they were dead. He also acknowledges Ruth as his new mother. His aggressive behaviour to the strangers shows his loathe towards Germans and the Nazis. He becomes revengeful and often steals from Nazi troops and German households as vengeance. Like Bronia, Jan also enacts the incidents of war by playing at firing squads and

torturing. When the Burgomaster orders them to go back to Poland, he thinks about hurting him. Jan also puts himself in the most dangerous situations during smuggling.

Throughout the novel, Jan is never broken down as everyone else who has burst into tears at some point. But Jan becomes emotionally weak and uncontrollably wails when he sees the serene Swiss mountains instead of ruined buildings and war zone to which he had not been accustomed to for a long time. Even when he starts a peaceful life with Balickis, Jan is not healed and continues to steal and fight with people. It takes a long time for Jan to get settled. Eventually, he starts to adjust to his new life.

Even though the four children struggle with physical and psychological trauma, they all exhibit exceptional courage and resilience to survive the harsh conditions. They act matured beyond their age, even little Bronia. The silver sword becomes their symbol of hope and they hold to it. They stay together as one to accomplish their goal. With the help of the kind people, they encounter during the journey and their parents' care, they become able to overcome the struggles they endured physically and mentally.

## Chapter 4

### The Trauma Imprint on *The Book Thief*

The adventures of a young girl, named Liesel Meminger, in Nazi Germany are revealed in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. She is the book thief, who is book obsessed, as the title would imply. After Liesel's brother passes away on a train journey, her mother gives her to Hans and Rosa Hubermann, a German couple.

Upon arriving at the Hubermann residence, she finds herself unable to adapt to her new circumstances. But her foster parents, especially Hans, her papa, are so kind and caring that she is able to settle. She quickly becomes friends with Rudy Steiner, the boy who lives next door, and the two of them lead a typical Himmel Street life. Following her brother's burial, Liesel pilfers the first book. She is incapable of reading at that point in time. After her father discovers the book, he helps her learn to read and she develops a word obsession. Then even in the riskiest circumstances there is a great deal of book theft. She builds a friendship with Ilsa Herman, the mayor's wife, by picking up laundry for her foster mother. Ilsa then lets her use her library to read books. Her life completely turns upside down when Hans Hubermann hides Max Vandenburg, a Jew, in their basement. She gradually develops a friendship with Max while keeping this secret from everyone else.

Stealing books from the Mayor's library, she reads to Max after he becomes sick. Max wakes up again after a long period of time. When she witnesses a group of Jews marching towards a camp, she feels sorry for them and her papa gives one of them a piece of bread – a move that gets her father severely beaten. Max is compelled to leave the Hubermanns as result of their growing fear of the raid. Every family is compelled to take refuge in a basement during an



air – raid, and everyone is terrified and sobs throughout the bombardment. Hans is eventually sent away after being forced to enlist in the German army. Liesel can't move on without her papa and Max, but the books give her some solace. Following Han's leg injury, he returns home. A few days following Han's return, Liesel becomes overwhelmed by emotions when she sees Max among the marching Jews. She embraces and weeps with Max but is brutally whipped by the German soldiers. When Ilsa Herman discovers that Liesel has been stealing books from her library, she gives Liesel a small book, so she can write her own tale. So at night, in her basement, Liesel writes her own story.

Regretfully, Himmel Street is bombed during an unannounced air – raid that occurs one night while everyone is asleep, everyone dies except Liesel. While writing her story in the basement, Liesel manages to survive. Liesel sees the lifeless bodies of her papa and mama and her best friend Rudy and is completely devastated. Liesel misplaces her story book as she sobs over the loss of her loved ones. The book thief's tale is rescued from the wreckage by Death, the narrator of the novel. Death also tells that Liesel had lived for a long time after that and when Death approaches Liesel to take her soul, it gives back her book.

Analyzing Liesel with the aid of trauma theory, it is evident that she had been dealing with internal conflicts even before her confrontation with war. She had lost her brother when she was ten years old. She had seen him dying in front of her own eyes during a train journey. She also doesn't understand why her mother gives her over to someone else. She doesn't remember her father and the only thing she knows about him is that he was a communist. So, when Liesel lives with her foster parents, she struggles with so many questions that she is unable to find any answer.

During her first days with Hubermann's, she has nightmares of brown shirts marching and the train journey and she wets her bed. At night she is unable to sleep and Hans always stays with her and helps her with cleaning bed sheets and herself. When Hans finds a book in Liesel's possession (which was stolen), he helps her to read it and then onwards, reading books at night becomes a habit and a distraction from her nightmares and sleepless nights.

She writes to her biological mother letters but receives no reply. When she overhears Hans and Rosa talking, she realizes that 'someone' had done something to her mother. But she couldn't figure out who was that. Eventually she realizes that it was Hitler who has taken away her biological father as well as mother. She was enrolled into a junior division of United German Girls. There she was taught to say 'Heil Hitler' properly, to march straight, roll bandages and sew up clothes. When her papa and mama hide Max in their basement, Liesel is unaware of the danger. But papa asks her to keep it a secret and reminds her the consequences if anyone finds it, that her papa and mama will be taken away from her. So, Liesel becomes cautious about it. On one hand, Liesel lives with fear about the secret and on the other hand, she grows a warm friendship with Max which makes her life more meaningful.

She finds satisfaction in stealing. When she is distressed, she is tempted to steal something and mostly it might be books. She was invited into Ilsa Herman's library, but when Ilsa fires her mother from washing laundry, Liesel becomes angry with her and leaves her. So, she finds happiness in stealing books from Ilsa's library. Most of the time, she is accompanied by Rudy Steiner in stealing. She is shattered when Max becomes sick and bed ridden and she reads for him the books she had stolen from the mayor's library. When she watches the Jews marching towards a camp, she is torn apart to witness it. When Nazis come to inspect their basement to check if it can be appointed as a shelter during the air-raids, Liesel becomes nervous and

struggles with anxiety, imagining them finding Max hiding. When her family seek shelter in Fiedlers' basement during the air-raid, she sees the horror in people's face including Rosa Hubermann. She finds that children are the most afraid. "The children hugged their parents, and it took many minutes for all of them to fully realize that they were alive, and that they were going to be alive" (Zusak 404).

On the second air-raid it becomes more gruesome. Everyone panics and wails and Liesel begins to read from her books to calm everyone. When Max is obliged to leave her, in fear of Gestapo and raid, Liesel couldn't part from him. The pain gets worse when Hans is forced to join the German army. She feels suffocated when she bids her papa goodbye. With her papa, Max and Alex Steiner, Rudy's father gone, she starts to hallucinate and sees them around her. "She saw her papa in the window at school. Max often sat with her by the fire. Alex Steiner arrived when she was with Rudy, staring back at them after they'd slammed the bikes on Munich Street and looked into the shop" (Zusak 468). When Hans returns with his leg wounded, Liesel is relieved that he is back. Later she sees Max among the marching Jews and she couldn't bear the sight. When she approaches him, she is tortured by the soldiers. Her arms and legs ache and become numb. After that she stays in bed for three days as if she was sick.

On the night of the bombing of the Himmel Street, she loses everyone she loved. When she is rescued by the soldiers from the rubble, she screams on the top of her lungs. She gets severely injured, but feels no pain. All she thinks at that time was to find her parents.

"She screamed her reply. A stunning scream of the living. 'Papa!' A second time. Her face creased as she reached a higher, more panic-stricken pitch. 'Papa, papa!' They passed her up as she shouted, wailed and cried. If she was injured, she did

not yet know it, for she struggled free and searched and called and wailed some more” (Zusak 530).

She wanders through Himmel Street and finds it new and apocalyptic. When she finds papa, mama and Rudy all dead, she becomes anguished. Even Ilsa who later took care of her wasn't able to console her. It takes a long time for Liesel to come out the traumatic incidents she encountered.

Rudy Steiner, Liesel's neighbor and best friend, loves her secretly and comes from a family of six children. He is described as boy who was always hungry and a little crazy. Rudy was a member of Hitler Youth and was constantly bullied and tortured by Franz Deuschten, an irate Hitler Youth leader. It was Rudy's hunger that prompted Liesel to steal with him. Together they steal apples along with other children. Rudy was good in academics and was a good athlete, so that he was examined by the doctors and nurse to recruit him for the German army while he was fourteen. They examined him completely naked along with two other boys and he feels humiliated and helpless in front of them. When he was asked to join the army, Alex Steiner refuses and volunteers himself instead of Rudy. Rudy becomes desperate to find Hitler in order to kill him for taking his father away from him. When Rudy sees the marching Jews, he asks Liesel to give them bread with him amid the danger of getting caught.

Throughout the novel, Rudy remains a lively and charismatic character and his grief is revealed when he confesses to Liesel that he misses his father. Rudy offers a teddy bear to a dying pilot, who was in fact trying to bomb the surrounding areas. When Liesel ruthlessly gets beaten by the soldiers, Rudy comes to rescue her. “He collected her punches as if they were presents. He accumulated the loud, clumsy specks of saliva and tears as if they were lovely to his face. More importantly, though, he was able to hold her down” (Zusak 547). Even with his

innocence and selflessness, Rudy loses his life in the end of the novel. Death itself, narrates his death as something hard and painful. Rudy constantly asks Liesel for a kiss and he gets that kiss when he stops breathing. In the novel, Rudy has a transformation from apple stealer to a giver of bread and teddy bears.

Both Liesel and Rudy face a lot of physical and psychological trauma throughout the novel. In Liesel's case she has been haunted by traumatic memories even before war. It elevates after the war. She has been always unable to sleep and had recurring nightmares. She was more attached to Hans and Max. In their absence, she had Rudy to fill that gap. She used to fight with boys in her school and has been punished. When Ilsa Herman fires her mother from the job, she hurts Ilsa with her words. She gets physically hurt by the brutality of the soldiers. When she realizes that her biological father and mother had been taken away by the Nazis and Hitler, she despises Hitler and spits loathsome words against him. "I knew it.' The words were thrown at the steps and Liesel could feel the slush of anger, stirring hotly in her stomach. 'I hate the Fuhrer', she said. 'I hate him'" (Zusak 124). She lives in fear her whole life and was anxious about her parents' and Max's safety. Her post-traumatic stress reactions are described as follows,

"It would have been easy to say nothing, but Liesel had the opposite reaction to her devastation. She sat in the exquisite spare room of the mayor's house and spoke and spoke – to herself – well into the night. She ate very little. The only thing she didn't do at all was wash. She slept a lot and didn't dream, and on most occasions, she was sorry to wake up. Everything disappeared when she was asleep" (Zusak 580).

After these painful memories, Liesel is said to have lived to a very old age and died in a suburb of Sydney. She got married and had children and grand-children. In her final visions, she had carried Hans and Rosa, her brother, and Rudy.

Rudy also used to pick fights with others. When he is beaten down by Franz in front of a crowd, he feels so humiliated. As he was always hungry, he was compelled to steal to satiate hunger. He feels guilty to send his father to army. Like Liesel, Rudy also resents Hitler and goes in search of him to kill him. His love for Liesel is selfless and the novel has a heart wrenching end with Rudy's unfortunate death. With the portrayal of Liesel and Rudy, the novel offers a different perspective of Nazi Germany during the Holocaust.

## Chapter 5

### Collected Reflections

Both the novels are set against Germany during Second World War and Holocaust. While the characters of *The Silver Sword* are from Poland, characters in *The Book Thief* are from Germany. But it can be seen that all these children detest Hitler and Nazis. In a very tender age, they are thrown into the world of power, politics and injustice and they show hatred towards it.

Edek is enlisted into the Boys' Rifle Brigade and Liesel and Rudy are the members of United German Girls and Hitler Youth respectively. From the young age, they are taught to march, show discipline and are even given guns to become future of their nation. "We are gradually succeeding", the nurse was informing the teacher, 'in creating a new future. It will be a new class of physically and mentally advanced Germans. An officer class'" (Zusak 440). But the children are not feeling the same way and they feel bored and ridiculous of it. In both novels, children are separated from their parents at one point. However, Ruth, Edek, Bronia, and Jan finally meet their parents, but Liesel loses her biological as well as foster parents whereas Rudy dies with his mother and siblings.

A common trait in all these children is the temptation for stealing. In both contexts, they are forced to steal in order to fill their stomach. Jan steals as a revenge against the Nazis who have plundered enough from their land. Rudy and Liesel is not feeling any regret for stealing the food which was for the priests because they consider them as fat and believe that they can survive a week without food. On Liesel's case, stealing is a distraction and it gives her satisfaction when she is in distress. Even though these children suffer from hunger, they are kind enough to give it to the needy.

Inability to sleep and having nightmares are shown by Edek, Ruth and Liesel. Edek sees nightmares when he becomes sick and Ruth often has nightmares and always stays awake at night. Liesel sees nightmares most of the days and she only stops it and sleeps after the death of her loved ones. Jan, Bronia and Liesel is more attached to one person in particular and they are more reliant towards them. In Jan's and Bronia's case, it is Ruth and Liesel relies more on Hans Hubermann. It is Jan who picks up fight and behaves rudely to elders in *The Silver Sword*. In *The Book Thief*, it is mostly Liesel Meminger. They show their resentment towards Nazis and Hitler by being aggressive in nature and sometimes talk really in an angry manner. They don't understand the meaning of all the killing and bombing. At one point, Rudy even wants to kill Hitler for destroying their life.

These children find meaning in trivial things and it is shown in both works. In *The Silver Sword*, it is the silver sword which belonged to Joseph Balicki that becomes the symbol of their hope. Even in the greatest suffering, one glance over the silver sword builds determination in those children. Books and papa's accordion is the symbol of hope in *The Book Thief*. Jan has a wooden treasure box he always carries under his arm and it is never opened in front of anyone. It is after its loss Jan reveals what was inside it.

“‘Everything in the box is lost’, said Jan, ruefully. ‘Now the fishes have all my treasures. As they are not secrets anymore, I’ll tell you what they were. Two cat’s claws, a gold curtain ring, and the buttons off a German uniform. Half a pen nib and an acorn. A stick of Russian shaving soap with some hairs from Ivan’s chin struck in it. Frau Wolff’s tin-opener. A silver teaspoon from that house in Berlin where the English soldier lived – you didn’t know I’d kept that, did you, Ruth? The brightest feather in Jimpy’s tail – that was precious. And three dead fleas,



from the hairy chest of Bristo the chimpanzee. Bristo gave them to me himself, and I shall miss them dreadfully”” (Serrailier 170).

It is not clear why he had kept all these little things in his box. It seems that all those items carry memories at one point in his life and he keeps them to cherish those memories. Likewise, Liesel collects thirteen items to give Max as presents when he becomes sick. She becomes desperate to see Max open his eyes again and for that she collects them. These thirteen presents are, one trampled ball, one ribbon, one pine cone, one button, one stone, one feather, two newspapers, a lolly wrapper, a cloud, one toy soldier, one miraculous leaf, a finished *Whistler* which is a book she has been reading for him every day and a slab of grief. She herself wonders how those insignificant things give comfort to someone. But then she realizes that it showed that she cared and it might give her something to talk about when Max woke up.

All the children are confronted by the horrible plight of war. The Balicki children witness their father and mother being torn apart from them and Jan being a homeless is the sole witness of the destruction that takes place in Warsaw. Even during their travel, they see people taking refuge and their suffering and they could only feel pity for them. Liesel, on losing her real parents and brother starts a new life with Hubermanns and it is wretched when Himmel Street is bombed. Liesel and Rudy feel sorry for the marching Jews who are taken into the concentration camps. They are unable to see the Jews being beaten by the German soldiers. Both the novels convey the message that these are not the events that a child is ought to witness or encounter.

Even though they are forced to face the harsh realities of war, they never give up hope and show exceptional courage. The hazardous journey of the Balicki children and Jan in the middle of the calamities and their narrow escapes from dangers are example for it. Liesel reading books to calm the people in the basement during air-raid and Rudy and her giving breads to the

marching Jews show their courage and kindness. Even after the traumatic incidents, they find resilience and coping mechanisms and thus they become able to overcome those haunting memories.

Although *The Silver Sword* and *The Book Thief* has been written in two different centuries, the conditions faced by the characters remains the same. Therefore, it can be said that these novels have relevance even in the present day as there are so many wars going on in different nations. It is important to understand the suffering of children in the war zones and political leaders, authorities and humanitarians should be taking measures towards a safer future where there is no fight, injustice and hatred but only harmony and peace.

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