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**The Horrors of War and Division: A Comparative Study on *The Book Thief* and *Ice-***

***Candy Man***

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**Abstract**

This study aims to analyse the background and history of novels set during the traumatic years of the World War II. The comparative analysis studies two selected novels, *The Book Thief* and *Ice-Candy Man*, which portray the happenings that shook the whole world. The horrors faced by the young girl protagonists Liesel and Lenny during the war, the types of environment that moulded them to grow a fondness towards reading, and the psychological connection to their closer affinity are discussed. For them, books seemed to be a sort of distraction and relief from the harsh external world. As the world of young children depicted a dreamy world, the books they took over matched the sweetness of ruminative thoughts and guided them along ruthless paths. This study aims to explore how the world that insisted on a playful and happy note for them turned otherwise because of the political turmoil and unfortunate turns in their lives. By analysing their relationships with the characters, the literature on resilience from trauma has been highlighted. This research serves as a mediator in connecting a person with the surroundings with a ray of positivity to overcome problems.

**Keywords:** war, trauma, young children, books, hope



## Introduction

The world we live in has been put into serious troubles during the time of war, which adequate our tendency to separate, fight, and shed violence. Religions, morality, and the self, which do not go for bloodshed, are mandated through wars to be merciless against the opposed. Wars are not life swamping, only at borders, but they have a tremendous effect on people's personal lives. If wars are powerful enough to dissipate the whole world, their after-effects are sure to be found on the people who fight and also the people who surround them. Commoners who do not partake in this height of violence are attributed to long-lasting mental trauma and constant fears of whatever they accomplish thereafter. For years, the world has become a dark place to return to peace and originality. The chosen authors are victims themselves who have suffered the impacts of wars, which made their novels more oriented. Moreover, the time zone chosen for the study covers two historic events that have been black until now. These were the Second World War and the Nazi Holocaust. This double-imprinted effect is discussed in this study, in addition to the rays of hope shed by the authors, which resemble a streak of light in a night sky.

Writer and novelist Markus Frank Zusak was born in Australia, and is best known for his books *The Book Thief* and *The Messenger*, the novels written for young adults, which later became international bestsellers. *The Book Thief* was published in 2005 and won the 'Kathleen Mitchell Award' in literature. Markus Zusak began his career as a successful writer of young adult fiction, but for his fifth novel, he set out to relate the experiences of his parents growing up during World War II for an adult experience. A true-life incident has made Zusak create a whole novel about the threats of war and the Nazi regime. Zusak's mother shares the story of a young boy who is mercilessly whipped by Nazi soldiers to offer bread to an old Jewish man. The incident depicted a few Jews marching down the street, guided by the Nazis. The Nazis, German soldiers, took away the bread offered and whipped

both the man and boy. The contrary between human division as high and low struggled within the mind of the author. While writing this book, he said that much of the inspiration for *The Book Thief* came from the eyewitness account told by his mother when he was growing up as a child. As a child, his mind, tender and young, had been deeply wounded by the inhumane act by the soldiers, which struck him like an arrow. Zusak saw this as an ultimate symbol of the difference between kindness and cruelty, and wanted to register it in any of his writings.

Zusak's father was a soldier during the war in Vienna in 1945. It was a time when Europe was under the clutch of the Second World War. There was lament and bloodshed everywhere, and the narrator was chosen to be death. Death seemed comforting to many, especially soldiers, who longed for death and were unable to bear the pain. The first year was marked by victory of the Soviet Red Army. His mother was a German who grew up in Munich, Germany, where she witnessed firsthand both the intense bombing of that city by Allied planes and the degradation of the Jews during the Holocaust. Through his mother's eyes, Zusak admitted that war incidents had also affected him. The color red plays a significant role in the novel for its horrific and unavoidable redness of a firebombed city and the pivotal nature of people. It emphasises words as a way of contrasting with the tragedy faced by people. The author's personal life has much to do with his novel *The Book Thief* and his perspective in observing the incidents faced by his parents while withholding a child protagonist.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistani novelist of Gujarati- Parsi descent, who writes in English and is resident in the US. She was born to Gujarati-Parsi-Zoroastrian parents of Peshotan and Tehmina Bhandara in Karachi, and later moved to Lahore. She was two years old when she contracted polio, which affected her throughout her life. This became a biographic element of her characterization of Liesel in the *Ice- Candy Man*. She was nine years old in 1947 at the



time of Partition. The novel *Ice- Candy Man* was initially called “Cracking India,” signifying the break of India into twos. The incidences she faced shaped the characters of her novel, as well as its background. Like Pakistani, she was often told that Pakistan was too remote in time and place for Americans or Britishers to identify with. She was born into a wealthy family and spent her first seven years as an Indian citizen in the city of Lahore. In 1945, after India was divided, she became a Pakistani. The tremendous turmoil and bloodshed she observed as a child left its mark on her, and later in her fiction, she received those powerful memories of partition. The book is both uplifting and heart-wrenching, filled with characters that readers grow to love and despise as the story unfolds. Sidhwa registers that it was a very difficult and painful book to write, as it commemorated her life experience. The book won the ‘Liberator Prize’ in Germany in 1991.

### **Background and Theoretical Framework**

There are many terrible incidents that took place in the pages of world history, and the year 1945 is remarkable for its scarlet marks. For most countries and continents, as a consequence of the World War, 1945 has been a frightening year, full of alarms and bloodfills. The mass murder of Europe’s Jews occurred place during World War II (1939-1945). As German troops invaded and occupied increasing territories in Europe, the Soviet Union, and North Africa, the regime’s racial and anti-Semitic policies became more radical, moving from persecution to genocide. In 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In India, the partition was established in the Indian Independence Act of 1947, which resulted in the dissolution of the British Raj (the British government). The two self-governing countries, Pakistan and India, legally came into existence at midnight on 14-15 August, 1947. The calmness experienced after these massive storms could not be compared to that of dark days.

Elisabeth Krimmer, a Professor of German Studies says that, “The insoluble tie between the Second World War and the Holocaust has changed the way in which authors conceive of warfare and of questions of agency and victimization” (Krimmer 108). These hard parts in history were encountered by writers during this period, who were able to effectively bring out traces of conflicts and warfare. Markus Zusak and Bapsi Sidhwa belong to two different nationalities, yet they are united by the struggles and confrontations they witnessed. Their works are sure to splatter annihilation they faced, on the readers. The two novels, *The Book Thief* and *Ice-Candy Man*, share many common themes, history, and background. For instance, the holocaust in Germany and the partition in India happened simultaneously, which influenced the authors in writing the strong evidence they looked at. It matches classical times when there was a time for war and then a time for peace.

The novel *The Book Thief* is about a young girl, Liesel Meminger, who grew up in Germany amidst the conditions of World War II. Liesel lives with her fosters—parents Hans Hubermann and Rosa Hubermann—after being left by her mother to them when she was nine years old. The story occurs in a small town in Molch. Hans helps her in learning to read, where her first reading experience started with *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*, which she got in her brother Werner’s burial. Werner dies of reasons like poverty, hunger, cold and lack of medical treatment when they were travelling in train. It was her first theft of books from which it became a practice.

Liesel’s foster parents Hans and Rosa did not agree to the principles of the Nazi regime, although they were not Jews. In this part of the story, the author picturises the benevolence and humanity that is still alive in the world amidst separation and commotion. They are seen privately fighting against violence by hiding a Jewish boy, Max Vandenberg, in their basement. They maintained a promise to the one who saved his life, and Liesel gained a new companion amidst chaos. Liesel and Max become close friends. Their anti-Nazi beliefs



remained secret until the day when Hans helped a Jew who struggled to keep up with the group when marched to a concentration camp. Hans publicly breached the old Jew, and he was drafted into the military when air raids over major German cities escalated in terms of frequency and fatality. Hans is worried that this incident will draw suspicion from his family and that Max will no longer be safe in his basement. So, he sends him away. After Max leaves, Liesel is given a book he made her, *The World Shaker*, written on friendship. Unfortunately, Max is unable to escape the Nazis, and Liesel sees him marching through the town, while the book she writes was "The Book Thief".

Throughout the novel, *The Book Thief*, Liesel steals many books. She learns the importance of books and words that confront her, while the Nazis control her world. The whole story is narrated by 'Death' - the death after Leslie lived long with her husband, kids and grandchildren. There is a positive note at the end, where Max is shown to survive the camp. Finally, they got reunited. Finally, death gives her the book she had written as it took away her soul in return. This means that her work continued, even after her lifetime. This is a major theme in war poems and write-ups, where there is a positive note at the end that indicates a string of hope in life.

*Ice-Candy Man* tells the heartbreaking story of the Partition of India and the 1947 upheaval that left countless people homeless, hurt, and dead. This particular period has been marked from many points of view, and Sidhwa approaches the subject from the point of view of an eight-year-old girl who lived through troubles. Once precocious and seemingly innocent to the world, the protagonist Lenny finds herself altered forever from the reality unfolding around her, as India and Pakistan suffered from partition. Through the eyes of a little girl, the author sees the lives of adults growing up during war. She is taken care by an 'ayah,' a helper woman, since she was polio- attacked. She mentions the fright people had for the Nazi soldiers and the girl's life with caretakers, rather than parents. The 'ayah' is a Hindu woman,



and the cook who worked there is a Muslim. The turmoil between Hindus and Muslims broke out in such a way that all the bets were off the table, including love.

Sidhwa provides a breathtaking view of power, terror, and heartbreak through the eyes of a young, naive girl. Lenny's insights are clouded with bloodshed and the very worst of human conditions. The Ice candy man, the lover of Ayah, narrates emphatically and comically. Lenny's narrative shows the importance of the community, especially during tumultuous times. Lenny looks at her immediate family, extended family and family of servants and finds points of connection. These relationships help to inform her worldview and allow her to make informed decisions based on newfound love and compassion.

### **Literature Review**

The Guardian reviews *The Book Thief* as, "It makes you realize that so many people in Germany became victims of the war, that they were not all evil as they are often portrayed" (Guardian). Reviewer Rachael Carney says that, "There is a strong focus on the small, intricate details of life, such as the color of the sky or the shape of clouds, which helps you see the story through Liesel's eyes. Her role as a book thief is both comical and deadly. Her early life is stricken by poverty and she is unable to read, but desperate to learn...it is through Max that Liesel begins to learn about the world and, most importantly, about the power of friendship" (Created to Read).

Considering *Ice-Candy Man*, reviewer Kirsten says that, "We see the how this cast of characters that surrounds Lenny, her family members, the staff that work for her family, her beloved Ayah and Ayah's admirers, and others are shown as a community interacting, working, and socializing with each other without regard to religion. However, as the Partition nears, each character begins to identify with his or her different religion and the consequences of having differing religious identities are played out in often cruel and dehumanizing ways" (The Story Graph). The other title of this novel, *Cracking India*,

portrays how India is torn up in times of war, along with the expectations and innocence of any child like Lenny.

*The Book Thief* presents the voice from the German community to the authors, worthy of inducing empathy and tears. Similarly, the Ice-Candy Man also rolls on from a young girl's point of view as she reaches adolescence, picturizing a clearer view of ideologies, war, separation, crooked mindedness, and narrowing paths as an adult.

### **Methodology**

Comparative literature was used to examine the similarities between the two novels. The term 'comparative literature' was coined in 1848 by Victorian poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold to compare literary works across languages and cultures. It was widespread in the nineteenth century, when many people discovered new ideas. However, the term 'world literature' was popularized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827, which formed the basis of comparative studies. He believed that reading the literature of others could enrich one's understanding and expose readers to different ways of thinking and feeling. Eventually, this leads to cross-cultural exchange and acknowledgement of universal themes. Comparative literature transcends national boundaries and languages, and encounters common themes. Henry H. Remak, a famous American comparativist, defines comparative literature as, "The study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts, philosophy, history, and social science, religion, etc., on the other' (Stallknecht 3). Experiences across different cultures promote a sense of shared human experience and break down the prejudice. The enlightenment era in which Goethe lived fostered humanity, which marks another reason for the flourishing of this study.

Comparative literature tries to integrate methods from history, philosophy, and arts, and opens dialogues between other disciplines such as sociology. It describes different



methods of comparison, such as the comparison of common themes between two texts and the intertextuality between two texts. The ‘thematic universal’ is emphasized by the Germans and it can also be done between two genres across cultures. The French contributed to the influence of this literature by proclaiming their first literary influence in Europe. Americans specializing in parallel studies widened the scope of this study by including psychological and sociological approaches.

Themes and motifs play an important role in novels because every piece of writing is set with a goal or motive. This is the main subject matter of the novel, which carries meaning. The contribution of different schools to comparative literature made it easy to compare the impact of American novels on French fiction during the interwar period. Comparatists can study the interface between literature and other arts such as paintings, scriptures, music, and architecture. The interaction between individual writers is also studied, as translation remained as one of the basic tools of comparative literature

### **Main Review**

The novel *The Book Thief* tells the story of an extraordinary, spirited young girl who was sent to live with a foster family during World War II. She represented the German victims, who were under the hold of death, as they waited to embrace them at any time. No longer as she takes *Gravedigger’s handbook*, she is separated from her only leftover soulmate, her mother. As her mother could not meet Liesel’s financial needs and safety, she handed her to another family. From then on, Liesel views the book not as a book but as the sole memory of her mother and brother. Fascinated by the only book she brought with her, she began collecting books as she found them. With the help of her new parents and a secret guest under the stairs, she learns to read and create a magical world that inspires everyone.

The novel *Ice-Candy Man* is also told from the perspective of a child from Parsi community presenting the story of the partition and Hindu- Muslim riots from a neutral

perspective. Like Lenny, the author too suffered from polio and obviously it is her reminiscence or the past life experience. Nostalgia is a theme that connects both the novels through its theme and subject matter. Books are objects used to connect the memory lane of the characters, along with the historical happenings in world's history. Lenny views the incidents of partition happening around her to be the macrocosm of the history chapters she has read in her textbooks. Unable to walk away from the world, she is stuck in her wheelchair, which again opens up the other sides of the characters surrounding her.

Both the narrators of the novels are young girls of eight to nine years. This is a very tender age to overcome pain and a highly observant phase in a person's life. Also, the fact that they are females, tells us that they had experienced a quite unnatural world through their views and insights. Liesel and Lenny symbolize each other and all the sufferings that would happen to a blooming kid. Dorian Stuber, a critical writer on Holocaust studies records that, "Holocaust literature shows that there is no transparent or straightforward representation, especially of overwhelming events; instead, representation is invariably hesitant, indirect, and partial—yet no less valid for that" (Vernon 278). The expressive nature and impact created on incidents, is highly present in children than adults, which gives a more lucid view on the war. Another analogy between the characters is their alienated lives from their parents. They see a completely new world without proper protection even though they are brought up in the hands of safe foster parents. The characters revolving around them like Max or the Ice candy man portray a newer vision to their lives.

The narrators are thus highly sensitive and deeply significant of the exact reflection of pain of the writers. This is because the young adolescent stage plays a vital role in developing the psyche of children, where they perceive a lot, in terms of what they see and hear. It gets registered in their subconscious and would have any effect on them, by affecting and moulding their life. According to the "Object- Relations Theory", "children develop an

internal image of various people around their initial years of growth. It is believed that the psyche that children develop during their early years through constant exposure to various objects around them, determines their behaviour as adult to a significant extent.” (The Hindu). Stuber quotes a passage from Ruth Kluger’s memoir *Weiter leben: Eine Jugend*, in his essay “Stubborn Experiments: Bearing Witness in Holocaust”, which describes the distortion of a familiar childhood desire in a horribly way. It says as, “Most children, want to know the secrets of sex—that is, of life; she wanted to know the secrets of death” (Vernon 288).

Many psychological findings tell that the childhood experiences they get and the kind of treatment they undergo by their family, friends and neighbours have a strong impact on the kids as they grow up. “For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement, and the staggered onslaught of thoughts” (Zusak 21). Liesel gets constant nightmares for the first few months, remembering the face of her brother. The sub-conscious mind which stores all these data, recollects it then and there and the unresolved ones are reproduced in either writings, speeches, sharing of traumatic experiences or by having an adverse effect on the people they encounter in the latter parts of their lives. Lenny gets to know the political, religious and war conflicts that are going on around her, as he grows up, Maturity shows her the terrible side of society, and the change in people from strangers to neighbours or friends to foes. Stuber refers to the literary critic James E. Young in terms of the mode of writing adopted by war writers.

Young’s claim is relevant to the discussion of Holocaust literature because it implies that one’s experience of the world is tied to one’s ability to describe it. Experience is not the same as language, but it must pass through language. Thus, our experience is “mediated” by the language, the metaphors, used to describe experience. (Vernon 281)

Pain that is hard to be reproduced, is often brought as metaphors, to conceal the verge of their own personal breakage. That is why the crucial memories of war and horror that are



imbibed within the young characters in both novels, as a result of their writers' experiences, bring an effective implication on a personal account, which is relatable to many. Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg diagnose these symptoms in Holocaust survivors as 'alexithymia' – the inability to signify, recognize and express feelings (Marcus 189). However, the novels are enough sources to purge the emotions of readers, through their strikingly harsh realities. The irony in Liesel's life is that she could neither read nor write, but develops passion for books. It is also books, which give her hope in life. It is the only sediment of moments, fossilized by the cruelty of war.

The war stories are seen from the eyes of young girl children, to show the cruelty of war upon women, pushing them to unpleasant and unsafe atmospheres and how it is uncanny for a child to investigate and get introduced to the ugly problems of adult society. The coarseness of war is depicted in the words of Lenny as,

No one had taught me to fear an immaculate Nazi soldier. Yet here he was, in nightmare after nightmare, coming to get me on his motorcycle. I recall another childhood nightmare from the past. Children lie in a warehouse. Mother and Ayah move about solicitously. The atmosphere is businesslike and relaxed. Godmother sits by my bed smiling indulgently as men in uniforms quietly slice off a child's arm here, a leg there (Sidhwa 28).

The novel brings the conscience to the readers, on how the world once looked as children, and to which extent humans have pushed it forward in terms of war and bloodshed. It is to remark that child marriages, women subjugation, forceful prostitution, sex slavery, violence and betrayal are mentioned through these lenses. Lenny's mother, a victim of woman subjugation, registers her problems which depicts the uncertainty in the life of women, while men lost their lives at war. Molesting of women and slaughtering of men, were inhumane occurrences in the warzone.



## Discussion

Death, nostalgia, violence and trauma are main themes recorded by many researchers in their area of study. The novel *The Book Thief* is considered to be a shout for the subjugation of subaltern people and the voice of the voiceless. It is also approached from the perspective of healing trauma and providing life to the readers. It comes under indirect holocaust literature, which highlights the other side of society and the lives of people. The novel *Ice- Candy Man* is studied from the postcolonial point of view, the identity crisis of people and trauma study. Memory plays a typical role in both novels, which can be taken into further studies.

Unlike the World War I, the World War II brought more trauma in people, as Elisabeth Krimmer acknowledges, “it the epoch-making texts of the post-1945 period do not focus on the experience of frontline fighting. Rather, the horror of the front recedes behind issues of guilt and suffering” (Krimmer 107). Before they could recall and get away from the impact of World War I and World War II engulfed millions of innocent lives in the Holocaust. The bloodshed days are remembered even now and the wars occurring in the current era, take one back to the archetypal series of war horrors.

## Conclusion

War zones are unfair in their approach to many innocent souls, who are budding with dreams and flying colours in their lives. But however, the part of life in between owed to wars, happens to be a turning point in their lives where they gain a lot of perspectives, lessons and experience. Elizabeth H. Cottrell says in her review of *The Book Thief* as, “This story is filled with sadness and heartache, yet time and again, one character or another exhibits such resiliency, courage, and integrity that it took my breath away and filled me with admiration and hope”, (Heartspoken). The characters try to unfurl their wings and fly heights in their remaining pages of life, thorough the power stored within them. They see themselves to be



the powerhouses of motivation, rather than seeking it from the world. “I flirt, briefly, with hope” says Lenny when she is treated with her treated foot. When they were clouded with misfortunes, hope was the only thing that carried them forward. Also, books gave them the power to motivate their inner selves, and its resilience transpires to the readers as well, who are sure to throw a path of light in their upcoming journey. War literatures not only show the hardships of war, but the timeless motivations of its survivors, as in Elie Wiesel an important figure in Holocaust Literature’s description on motivation of writing, “Convinced that this period in his history would be judged one day, I knew that I must bear witness” (Vernon 276) is likely to bring courage, perseverance and reawakening in a life crushed by overwhelming negativities.

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