FACULTY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMME

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Date of Event: 25 August, 2025

Faculty-in-Charge: Ms. Gigy Johnson



REPORT

As part of Faculty Enhancement Programme, a session was conducted on 25 August 2025, at the Seminar Hall, Main Block from 03:00 p.m. to 04:00 p.m. The paper was presented by Ms. Annie Sebastian, Assistant Professor, Department of English, on the topic "Reclaiming the Self: Trauma and Healing in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*". The session had the participation of 42 faculty members from various departments. The presentation focused on themes of trauma, identity and healing in the novel, offering literary and psychological perspectives. The session was interactive, with participants engaging actively through questions and discussions, contributing to a meaningful exchange of ideas.

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FACULTY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMME



Ms. Annie Sebastian
Asst. Professor
PG Department of English

Topic : Reclaiming the Self: Trauma and Healing in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

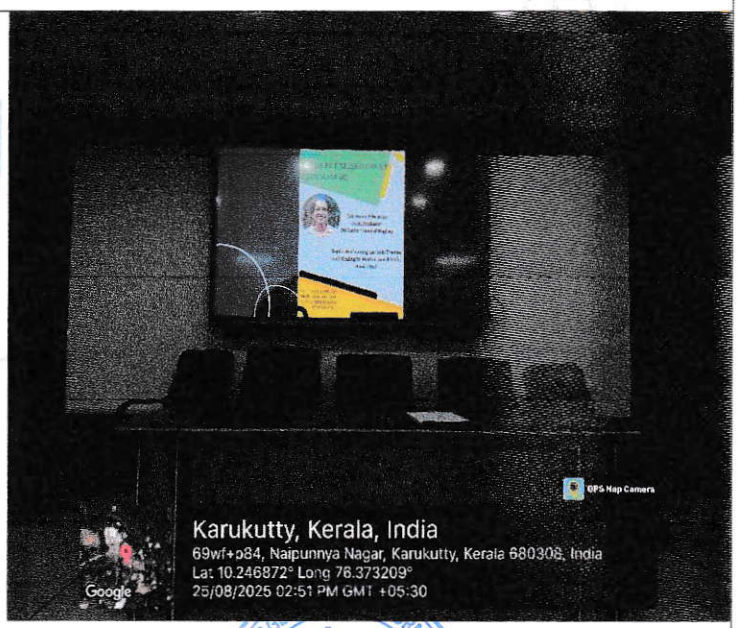
DATE : 25 AUGUST, 2025
TIME : 03.00-04.00 PM
VENUE : MAIN BLOCK, SEMINAR HALL

PHOTOGRAPHS









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Reclaiming the Self: Trauma and Healing in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

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Abstract

The word trauma is said to have originated from the Latin word 'Trauma', derived from the Greek word 'Traumatikos' which means a serious wound to the body referring to a physical wound in medicine. However, with the development of psychology, researchers found the connection between people's abnormal behaviours and their traumatic experiences. Thus, trauma also refers to a psychic wound caused by a distressing experience and the anguish that invariably follows. Psychoanalytic theories on trauma paired with additional theoretical frameworks such as post structural, sociocultural, and postcolonial theory form the basis of criticism that interprets representations of an extreme experience and its effects upon identity and memory.

In modern times, trauma theory is said to have been first used by Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) the origins of which can be traced back to Freud's psychoanalysis, where he claims "all neurosis was a result of previous traumatic experience". It purports that when traumatic events occur, the brain in a protective gesture, blocks them from fully entering the consciousness. They are repressed and buried in the depth of the psyche, for the large part inaccessible to the conscious individual in normal everyday life. However, these traumatic stimuli refuse to remain buried and often assert themselves as intrusive images and waking nightmares; as symptoms of trauma-related illnesses or through unconscious acts of repetition. This study traces the traumatic experiences and its imprints on the psyche of Liesel through the lens of Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* and the healing power of words that abets her survival.

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The Book Thief by Markus Zusak, is one of the finest examples which showcases trauma and suffering from the point of view of a nine-year old, in the backdrop of one of the most horrific and agonising events of the last century. It unfurls within the palm of death—both the tragic death of Liesel's brother that instigates the novel and the destruction of Himmel Street that concludes it. Nestled in a war-torn Europe, the main character's childhood is filled by encounters with Death. These encounters plunge her into a labyrinth of trauma as she searches for grounding in the constant upheaval. Liesel's portrayal as a girl enveloped in darkness, in the shadow of death speaks for the silent voice of the traumatized.
Key words- Holocaust, Power of words, Survival, Trauma

Introduction

The Book Thief follows the story of a young German girl, Liesel Meminger, and her struggle for survival during the World War II. The atrocities of war rattle the foundation of her developing identity. Though Liesel may not always be an eyewitness to the gruesome violence of war, she nevertheless is enwreathed by the violence of death. Recounted through the voice of Death, *The Book Thief* exposes its destructive power and affirms the importance of the rehabilitation of the traumatized.

The majority of the novel takes place in the fictional town of Molching, Germany, near Munich, between 1939 and 1943. Liesel Meminger, nine years old is traumatised by the death of her brother and separation from her mother. Liesel goes to live with Hans and Rosa Hubermann at 33 Himmel Street in Molching. Later she meets her kindred spirit, Max Vandenburg a young Jewish man who is sheltered by her foster parents in their basement. Their misfortunes and the mutual love for books and words cements their strong and loyal bond. The novel also explores her friendship and tentative feelings of love for the next-door neighbour Rudy Steiner who worships the American athlete, Jesse Owens. Ilsa Hermann, the mayor's wife, plays a significant role in Liesel's journey even though their relationship is complicated. Shattered by the death of her son, she nevertheless introduces Liesel to an exciting and engrossing world of books by giving her access to her library. She is ecstatic at the sight of hundreds of books. She goes to touch them one by one, associating their physicality with the words within them. This magic world of books expands her imagination.

Markus Zusak, in his youth, had some background of a holocaust past, with his parents being a German and Austrian, who had migrated to Australia. Zusak certainly has grown up with that heritage

of knowing the stories of the Holocaust and its experiences, which has helped him to give a poignant portrayal of trauma in The *Book Thief.* Published in 2005, it became an international bestseller and was translated into more than sixty-three languages. The book, which was made into a major motion picture, was recognised with the 2014 Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults.

Trauma and the Power of Language

Liesel encounters Death for the first time when her brother dies on the train. She stares Death in the face, as she is shocked by her loss. Death admits when he picks up Werner's soul in his arms that Liesel "caught [him] out" (Zusak,21). In this moment, however, Liesel cannot not fully understand what she sees. She is imprisoned by the "stiffness of movement and the staggered onslaught of thoughts" (Zusak,21). These staggered thoughts reveal her inability to recognize death as it occurs. Her physical body witnesses her brother die, but her mind cannot process the event fast enough. As Death so accurately writes, "With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief . . . could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead" (Zusak,20). In this moment, Death indicates that as her physical body senses her environment with one eye open, her mind remains in a dream unable to process the moment. In her study, Caruth defines this phenomenon in trauma victims as the delayed response (Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History,11). By looking at Liesel's behaviour through Caruth's theory, it becomes clear that Liesel cannot yet respond to the event she witnesses. Even though Death does not threaten her, watching the death of her brother sufficiently sends her into a traumatic shock.

While her brother's death is enough to send Liesel down a traumatic spiral, her trauma builds when her mother abandons her. While Liesel's mother may feel that she makes the best decision for her daughter's safety, Liesel suffers from the traumatic shock of being left in a strange land after the death of her brother. She becomes, as Death sombrely points out, "an expert of being left behind" (Zusak, 5). In one traumatic day, Liesel loses every relationship that defines her world. The loss of her brother is heightened by the perceived betrayal of her mother. Liesel trusts her mother to take care of her; however, her mother betrays her trust by abandoning her. Instead of having the comforting embrace of a mother in the face of overwhelming grief, Liesel must face the world alone as a stranger in a foreign land:

> "..... if her mother loved her, why leave her on someone else's doorstep? Why? Why? Why? The fact that she knew the answer — if only at the most basic level — seemed beside the point. Her mother was constantly sick and there was never any money to fix her. Liesel knew that. But that didn't mean she had to accept it. No matter how many times she was told that she was loved, there was no recognition in that, the proof was in the abandonment. Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone." (Zusak,32)

Once Liesel loses her family, she loses the foundation for her identity. It is believed that there is a correlation between lost family and lost identity. The foundation of personality development lies in the security of the care and love provided by the dear ones in your life. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self.

At her brother's funeral, Liesel steals her first book, *The Gravediggers Handbook*. We are immediately told by Zusak that "the point is it didn't really matter what the book was about. It was what it *meant* that was more important" (Zusak 45). This observation proves to be accurate as Liesel in fact does not have the ability to read by herself at this stage in the novel. She is therefore compelled to steal the book because she needs a 'thing', an object to fill the metaphysical gap left by the loss of her brother. At the same time, she is subconsciously reaching out for the tool that will sustain her – that of a narrative.

Liesel's loss of identity culminates in the traumatic expressions of fear, nightmares, and book thievery. Caruth explains that trauma is not located in the event, but rather in its "very unassimilated nature to haunt the survivor later on" (Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History,4). Liesel's trauma is not isolated on that fateful train; rather, Liesel's trauma haunts her throughout her life. As Caruth explains, trauma is "the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—[it] is not . . . a simple and healable event, but rather an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History,4)

Since Liesel witnessed her brother's death, she was haunted by the recurring dream with the image of her dead brother staring at her on the train:

> "Those first few months were definitely the hardest. Every night, Liesel would nightmare. Her brother's face. Staring at the floor. She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets. On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for her

brother floated boat like in the darkness. Slowly, with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor. The vision didn't help matters, and it would usually be quite a while before the screaming stopped. (Zusak 38)

These dreams testify to the trauma that haunts her. She cannot escape her brother's death. Even the vision of the floating bed emphasizes her loss. Furthermore, she screams in terror at the reality of her loss. In addition, these dreams gradually become mixed with other traumatic images – visions of her mother, seeing her face "a hundred times in a single afternoon" (Zusak,38), Nazi 'brown shirts' and other fragmented symbols of her contemporary trauma. Liesel cannot escape these visions, and they follow her as constant reminders of her traumatic encounters. Liesel had nightmare every night is not because she was afraid of a dead boy but because she had been tortured by her inability to save her young brother. Thus, the guilt becomes her constant companion.

The behaviour of Liesel reveals her anxiety and fragility. She is reluctant to trust others and let them into her life. Her foster father, tears down the walls that she has erected with his persistent efforts. He offers her tools to survive the trauma. He guides her through the delightful and captivating world of language by giving her midnight lessons in the basement, reading from the book that she took from her brother's burial. Liesel claims fragments of her lost identity by learning to read. When Hans reads to her, it soothes her back to sleep. Later, her reading in the bomb shelter proves to be an anchor for herself and those around her. Reading aloud to her bereaved neighbour, Mrs Holtzapfel, also proves to be therapeutic. Even in her darkest moments when she is dealing with the suicide of her son, Mrs Holtzapfel calls for Liesel: "the words go unheard but the sound is comforting" (Zusak,477).

As Liesel begins her journey towards recovery, she depends on the relationships that surround her. When she first arrives on Himmel Street, she is nothing more than a scared child, scarred by the reality of war. However, Hans' soothing presence provides her with the security and continuity that she needs to trust her environment. Once she recognizes this safety in the shadows of Himmel street, she empowers herself through the reflections of others. She learns from Ilsa Herman the importance of reconciliation and acceptance. From Max, she learns to empathize with those who suffer. And with Hans, she discovers the power of her words and the hope for healing. She knows that she can rely on words and utilise them in her recovery. Thus, she becomes empowered to survive.

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Liesel understands the value of books, even though she fails to recognise it when the people of Molching gather for a bonfire to celebrate the *Führer*'s birthday during which they burn enemy propaganda, including books. Liesel notices three books deep in the pile that haven't burned. She pulls one out and tucks it beneath her shirt. The fact that three books survived the bonfire makes her realise that the world of words and ideas will always survive and that they are always worth fighting for. Rosa later gives her a book called *The Word Shaker*, which Max made for her. It contains many of Max's stories, thoughts, and sketches. The fable about the word shaker catches Liesel's attention. In it, Max describes a girl who is able to use words like some of Hitler's most skilled word shakers. It essentially dramatises the way Liesel utilises words to create a safe haven for herself in the midst of Nazism, and how he was able to find refuge in it as well. He suggests that words are the most powerful force there is, indicated by the fact that Hitler relies on the magic of words to gain control of the world

Liesel first realises the power of words in the small black binding of *The Grave Diggers Handbook*. She uses this book and the others that she steals in order to regain some semblance of control over death. Having faced a traumatic event, she feels especially powerless. The feeling of inadequacy is heightened by the ridicule she faces at school because of her illiteracy. By learning to read, however, she reclaims an aspect of control in her life. As a victim, Liesel resorts to book thievery and reading in order to conquer Death. However, as she begins to recover from her trauma, she becomes the author of her trauma story. No longer does she seek to erase her trauma from her life, but rather, through the reconstruction of her personal narrative, she accepts the reality of her loss into her life. In essence, as she recounts her encounter with Death, she learns to accept his inevitability. This acceptance signals the culmination of her recovery. Instead of trying to erase the past, she learns to assimilate it into her future.

As Liesel develops into a young woman who survived the trauma, she learns more than how to read; she learns how to utilize the power of language in her life. She uses books to soothe children in the bomb shelter as the sirens resound through the night. She uses her poetic language to bring Max mental pictures of the sky. In essence, she explores every aspect of language, even "the injury of words. Yes, the brutality of words" (Zusak,262) to hurt Ilsa Herman. All of these however, pale in comparison to Liesel's use of words in her recovery. As she writes from the basement, she faces her trauma, remembering her losses in painful and emotional detail. She gathers the soul of each loved one into her words to remember them always. Through the power of words, Liesel then reconnects with the world as a survivor with a

story to tell. Zusak summarises this important function of the narrative as Liesel speaks to the body of her dead father: "Goodbye Papa – you saved my life – you taught me to read" (Zusak,542).

The mayor's wife gives Liesel a blank notebook so she can begin writing her own story. One night, while Liesel is in the basement editing her book, her neighbourhood is bombed. Hans, his wife Rosa, her friend Rudy, and the rest of the neighbours are killed. When rescue workers pull Liesel out of the rubble and take her away, she leaves behind her finished book, called "The Book Thief." Death, who has been watching, rescues the book. Liesel goes to live with the mayor and his wife. She lives on and meets Death towards the end of her own life - a life well lived with her three children and many grandchildren. The novel concludes with Death presenting Liesel with her own book, "The Book Thief" when he comes to collect her soul.

Conclusion

The Book Thief reflects the collective story of trauma experienced during World War II and the Holocaust. The concept of trauma, is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world. Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. The incorporation of trauma into literature has enabled an enhanced explication of the power and complexity of the relationships among cataclysmic historical events. Zusak's exploration into trauma and the coping mechanisms employed by individuals is a poignant reflection upon the human condition. Furthermore, this story reveals how individuals face their darkest moments and still survive. Liesel's story does not trivialize the pain, nor does it sentimentalize the past. The trauma that comes with suffering is hard to forget but still they survive with the power of their indomitable will. Words and stories hold tremendous value in the novel, which suggests that they are among the most powerful ways in which people connect with one another on the road to survival, recovery and healing.

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