



Lives in Fragments: Trauma, Innocence, and Survival under Catastrophe

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Abstract

The Holocaust persists as a major tragedy of the 20th century because the magnanimity of the tragic loss continues to ripple sans generation. Scholars have delineated the multi-vector effects of the tragedy, though the effect of the trauma on children and young adults and their response to it is still an uncharted area of discussion. The proposed paper aims at exploring the response to trauma and the resilience strategies employed by the young Holocaust survivors as depicted in Jerry Spinelli's 2003 historical fiction, *Milkweed*.

The novel revolves around a boy in the early stages of adolescence (initially unnamed) and his life among other orphans in the war-struck city of 1945 Warsaw. Being a kid, Misha is shown to be oblivious of the growing anti-semitic sentiments among the people of the city because of the Nazi occupation. Even when he is sent to the ghetto, he cannot comprehend the gravity of the situation he is in. The paper elaborates upon atrocities inflicted upon children during the Holocaust through the eyes of a young kid and the defence mechanism employed by the young child that shelters him from the harsh realities, which in turn makes his response to trauma characteristically different from the others as it helps him out as a survivor from the appalling conditions.

Keywords: Trauma, Resilience, Young adult, Holocaust, defence mechanisms, *Milkweed*.

Introduction

The Holocaust remains one of the most devastating and appalling events in human history. In hindsight, one realises that the two world wars were fought merely to extend the geographical boundaries of their nations, but the ethnic cleansing of the Jews was in no way a mandate for this territorial expansion. Nonetheless, the temporary expansion of the empire resulted in the death of around six million Jews. Studies on the Holocaust have expanded considerably since the 1980s, and it is not merely restricted to historical accounts or examining of the concentration camps. Researchers are also examining, analysing, and assessing the Holocaust trauma through works of fiction, memoirs, diaries, and celluloids among other sources. Several critics have interpreted Holocaust fictions through the lenses of ideology, fragmentation, narrative techniques, and authenticity of the work. Talia E. Crockett in her article *The Silence of Fragmentation: Ethical Representations of Trauma in Young Adult Holocaust Literature* argues how the use of silence as a form of fragmentation is evolving in the works depicting the Holocaust trauma, and how the works are being created so as to convey the trauma to the teenagers and young adults while staying truthful and accurate in its portrayal. Nadine Majaro in her article *Looking for Ideology in Children's Fiction Regarding the Holocaust* examines *The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, who is an Irish writer, and *Milkweed* by Jerry Spinelli, an American author, and argues that both the texts contain both observable and concealed ideological standpoints which are strongly influenced by the countries of their residence. Aliona Yarova in her paper titled: *Haunted by humans: Inverting the reality of the holocaust in Markus Zusak's 'The Book Thief'* examines the narrative technique employed by Zusak where he has 'Death' as an unreal character and how the readers see all the events in the book through his eyes. Yarova examines and admires this inversion of reality through the character of death and his narration of events. While considerable research has been done on the political, historical, and cultural consequences and how it affected the literature produced, there has been little to no research on the psychological impact of the Holocaust on children and adolescents and the responses adapted by them to bear the unbearable. This study addresses the above-mentioned gap by analysing Jerry Spinelli's *Milkweed* and assessing the trauma faced by the children in the novel and the strategic responses employed by them to cope with the atrocities.

Jerry Spinelli's 2003 historical fiction *Milkweed* centres around a boy (initially unnamed) who is shown to be in the early stages of adolescence, or even younger, living on the streets of war-struck Warsaw, Poland. The other orphans on the street become his companions, and he is named Misha by one of them. Lacking a stable identity and societal awareness, Misha is initially shown to be oblivious to the growing anti-Semitic sentiments among the residents of the city as a result of the Nazi occupation of Warsaw. His obliviousness is heightened by his limited comprehension

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of the full ramifications of ghettoisation. However, his unmindful and oblivious nature acts as a cushion to the psychological trauma he is inflicted with. This paper argues that the young protagonist's dissociation, obliviousness, relationships, and reliance on imagination function as crucial defence and coping mechanisms that facilitate his survival under extreme duress conditions. Through the young boy named Misha, the writer might have aimed at providing a voice to all the children's voices which perished during the war.

Trauma theory offers an expository framework for understanding and examining the consequences of extreme violent situations. The theory is critical in understanding the psychological implications of violence, particularly when such violence is encountered during childhood, scarring one's identity for years to come. The American Psychological Association defines trauma as, "any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning." (04/09/2018)

Cathy Caruth, in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* (1996), defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon" (24). Caruth argues that trauma is marked by an recurrence, experience, or an incident that is "not fully assimilated as it occurs" (24). This trauma returns belatedly in the form of fragmentation and disruption of memory.

In light of the above-mentioned theoretical framework, *Milkweed* can be read and interpreted as an account of childhood trauma, while also providing an insight into the psychological strategies adapted by the protagonist. Misha's relationship to the other characters, lack of historical and societal comprehension, and dependence on imagination align closely with the recorded trauma responses of the children exposed to violence for a long time.

Innocence, Obliviousness, and Limited Comprehension as a Defence Mechanism

Being an orphan on the streets of Warsaw, Misha was not much aware of the growing hatred for Jews among the residents of the city. This hatred was a by-product of the annexation of Poland by The German-Nazi Army, and people were instilled with abomination for a particular community. People were targeting Jews by boycotting their shops, or stealing all the stuff from their shops. An instance mentioned in the novel relates how a Jewish owner of a baking shop guards the last loaf of bread in his shop while all the other shelves are empty. It is plausible that people were not only not buying from their shops, but even the wholesalers were not providing them with the raw materials to bake. Since these party lines had eluded Misha's ears, owing to his lack of historical and social awareness, he could not completely grasp the present scenario or foresee his future in the ghetto.

Misha infers that his first few encounters of discrimination towards Jews were comical. When he witnesses that a Jewish shopkeeper is stripped of his clothes and painted in yellow from head to toe, he laughs and finds it very amusing, and wishes to have experienced the same. When the residents painted the Star of David outside the shops of Jews, Misha thinks of it as a brilliant initiative which will make it easier to identify which shops belong to Jews, and he can know who is a Jew and who is not. While roaming the streets with Uri, one of the other orphans, Misha sees a big crowd gathered. He squeezes his way through the people to find a German officer making a Jewish man scrub the streets with his beard. He laughs and claps at this sight and even urges Uri to watch it. Even though he could see that the bearded man was not exactly happy doing this task, Misha wished he had a beard too, so he could scrub the streets with it. When he spots that a Jew's beard and hair are being cut off, he reaches there excitedly and tells the army officer that they should bring him (the Jew) to his salon and Uri will give him a good haircut and apply ointments on his hair too. Misha was still inferring these inhumane treatments of Jews as trivial, something which does not require much attention and time to be invested in.

With the growing shortage of food to steal, and the boys sleeping hungry at night, Misha was slowly getting acquainted with the scenario they were in. Uri told him and the other boys that things are going to get more tough for them now and Misha could sense the gravity of his words. One day while stealing food from a lady, a soldier shoots at him to stop him but the bullet only grazes through his ear and he is able to escape. But the very fact that soldiers were willing to shoot children, as long as they were Jewish, was frightening and terrifying to all of them. Soon their fear became absolute to them when the soldiers shot one of the orphan boys when they were trying to escape, and the boy became lifeless in an instant. Misha recalls only hearing a bang and the boy's body hitting the floor with a dull thud. The boys were petrified. Losing one of the ears was still bearable for Misha and he thought that he could outwit the soldiers, but upon realising that even he could be shot, he didn't dare to move. The soldiers were now a formidable figure for them.



Finally, when he is caught and treated as a Jew, he takes pride in his new identity and amuses himself by calling himself a “filthy son of Abraham.” This was the first time he was attributed with an identity, dangerous at the time as it was, and that too by an authoritative figure. The residents of the town and the soldiers saw him as a Jew. Hence, he could not be happier than he was because prior to this, the only stable piece of identity he was in possession of was a yellow stone around his neck and that did not convey much. His identity as a gypsy he knew was constructed by Uri, and that he will have to assert his identity for others to acknowledge it.

His wilful obliviousness, innocence, and lack of awareness act as a psychological buffer to all the things happening around him. This limited understanding of the present scenario prevents him from acknowledging the atrocities inflicted upon the Jews, which in turn extinguishes any emotional load that might encapsulate him. This cognitive avoidance of the facts acts as a coping mechanism which helps him evade the harsh reality.

Imagination and Fantasy as a Defence Mechanism

Misha's imagination and Uri's storytelling play a significant role in Misha's psychological well-being. Had it not been for Uri's fabricated story for establishing Misha's background and familial history, Misha would have lost his sense of identity. Misha was an orphan, and he hardly remembered anything about his family. He did not even have a name to begin with, and if he did, he could not remember it. The only piece of his identity and his roots were embedded in a yellow stone which he wore around his neck. But that yellow stone could not convey anything about his life or past either. It was Uri who gave him a name and created a background story for him to believe in. He even ensured that Misha remembers his new name and his past story, and instructed him to memorise all of it, so that even he (Misha) believes in it. This fabricated, rather a constructed, past gave Misha an actual sense of identity and something to believe in amid all the violence and chaos.

Having said that, none of that could have been accomplished had Misha not believed in it himself. This is shown in the novel through the constant repetition of his new name to everyone and his familial history to Janina and the other Milgroms. Misha's belief in his newly constructed identity plays a pivotal role in preventing him from the psychological horrors in the city and in the ghetto. He loved his name so much that even when he would steal food, he would shout his name in the face of his victims. This act of shouting his name in others' faces could be interpreted as his attempt to assert his identity not only to others but also to himself. By telling it to others, he is reaffirming it to himself that he is Misha Pilsudki and he is a Gypsy.

As imaginative and fictional as it might have been, Misha had something to believe in about himself and his past. Uri's fantastical story created a psychological continuity in Misha's mind, and he now had a sense of identity and being that he had to preserve and safeguard from all possible threats. Over time and through constant repetitions, a fictional story became real, and fantasy was able to overpower and replace the forgotten memories.

Role of Relationships and Familial Bonds as a Defence Mechanism

Having no memories of his childhood, parents, or other family members, Misha is shown to be an orphan roaming and stealing food on the streets of Warsaw. Here, he encounters Uri one day while stealing some bread. Uri takes a liking to him and treats Misha as a younger brother. He introduces Misha to the other orphans of the city and instructs them that he is also going to be a part of their group. When he sees that Misha is unclean and smells, he bathes him and gets him clean clothes to wear. He makes him sleep with him in his secret place, and he always sees to it that Misha is well fed. Uri also ensures that Misha doesn't end up in any kind of trouble. This caring nature of Uri replenishes Misha, and he feels content with their present lifestyle. Misha felt safe whenever he was with Uri, and he considered him his elder brother who would always look out for him. He would always tell Misha to avoid talking to soldiers when they were still outside the ghetto. His presence was enough to provide Misha with all the support, physical or moral, he needed. His presence in Misha's life had a deep, reassuring psychological impact on him and helped him to survive inside the ghetto. When the boys could not find anything to eat inside the ghetto, Uri came and gave Misha a candy as he knew that Misha must have been starving. Uri was the first family he had for as long as he could recall.

A while later, he met Janina and developed a friendship with her. Janina was younger than him, and he treated her as a sister. He would often meet her at the back of her house before they were sent to the ghetto. Inside the ghetto, he would play sticks with her and even introduced her to his other orphan friends. Food was becoming scarce inside the ghetto and many a times even he was starving and had to sleep hungry at night. He could see that even Janina was becoming thinner by the day and not just her but Mr. and Mrs Milgrom too. Even in his naivety, he knew that they were all slowly dying, and he had seen all the evidence inside the ghetto to not question this



inference. Everyday he would see bodies lying around in the streets and covered only with a newspaper. And he knew that people would come and remove the bodies every day, so these bodies were not the same bodies that he saw the day before. They were all recent and he realised that by the day they were increasing. And if it weren't for the harsh winters, he knew that all of them had died of starvation. Misha knew he had to cross the wall if he was to keep the family and himself alive. But that didn't stop Janina to keep him company or follow him around. Whenever he crossed the walls of the ghetto to smuggle food inside, Janina would always follow him to the other side. Misha knew it was dangerous crossing the wall and insisted that Janina shouldn't follow him, but she never listened and always stayed close to him. Misha was also very fond of her and loved her like a younger sister. Her presence in his life kept his boat afloat inside the ghetto, and every night he smuggled the food, he had something to look forward to and someone to care for. When they both started smuggling, he made sure that she was always close to him and crossed the wall carefully. His love and care for Janina countered all the hatred that was inflicted upon them, and her presence kept his spirits high.

Except for Janina, only Mr Milgrom cared for Misha. Her mother and uncle were not particularly fond of Misha and would rather he not stay with them. Yet, he stayed with them in their small apartment as per the wishes of Mr Milgrom. He loved Misha like his own son and always cared for him. He gave Misha his new identity and attached the Milgrom surname to his name. When the soldiers suddenly announced in the middle of the night that everyone inside the building had to assemble outside, when the snowfall was at its peak, Mr. Milgrom prevented Misha from being caught for not wearing the armband and gave him one. When Misha was getting tired standing in the snow for hours, Mr. Milgrom kept on instructing him that he is not to fall asleep or fall down, because he knew that if Misha falls to the ground even once the soldiers will shoot him. When Mr Milgrom gave Janina a gift on Haunkah, he gave one to Misha as well. He loved and cared for both of them equally. He was the father figure Misha never had, and over time, he started calling Mr Milgrom "Tata" (Janina called her father, Mr Milgrom, "Tata"). Mr Milgrom's presence in Misha's life served as an anchor in the high tide seas. Whenever he returned home, he knew that Mr Milgrom would be happy to see him well and safe. His constant support, love, and protection sheltered Misha from the psychological turmoil inside the ghetto.

The above-mentioned relationships served as a guiding light for Misha inside the ghetto. The emotional bonds he formed with all of them prevented his psychological deterioration inside that place and contributed significantly to his overall survival from the ghetto. These emotional bonds served as the strongest resilience strategies against the dehumanisation he and others were subjected to. The trauma did not extinguish; it was still there with its pangs getting deeper into the skin and causing damages which could not be cured. But the attachment that these bonds created restored meaning to their despair-filled lives and they had something to look forward to.

Conclusion

Milkweed by Jerry Spinelli represents childhood trauma and survival as an adaptive process, which is shaped by psychological resilience and defence mechanisms. The work's primary focus does not align with the recovery but with the adaptation. Misha's limited comprehension of violence, his reliance on storytelling and imagination, and the relationships he developed function as his resilience strategies, which helped him in enduring all the hardships under extreme duress conditions. These coping mechanisms cushioned him from the overwhelming trauma of the Holocaust and prevented his psychological deterioration while simultaneously disintegrating and fragmenting his sense of identity and being in the future to come. Spinelli here possibly asserts the paradox of childhood trauma: the same psychological strategies which help in facilitating survival might also contribute towards the rupture of identity.

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