

Critique of Stable Gender Roles in Markus Zussak's *The Book Thief*

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Abstract

The major characters in the novel *The Book Thief* perform their gender roles in a way that defies the notion of gender roles as a fixed category and it goes against the conventional idea of what we understand by gender. Traditional gender roles see males as masters and decision makers and women as caregiver who confines themselves within the four walls of the house. The present novel critiques and challenges those ideas through the actions and behavior of the main characters. It becomes clear from the observation that the male and female characters in the novel deviate from the roles that are assigned to them conventionally. Because of the impact of war males perform feminine roles and females act as masculine characters. For this kind of analysis of the novel, the present paper borrows ideas from Judith Butler, Judith Halbestam and other critics whose theoretical concepts have to do with the porosity of gender roles. It is an indication that gender roles are not stable and can undergo change as per the change in time and the change in the behavior and activities of the characters.

Keyword: gender roles, stable categories, critique, masculinity, femininity.

Introduction

These paper inquiries into how the novel *The Book Thief* critiques the stability of gender roles as they are conceptualized and understood conventionally from the perspectives of gender studies. Conventional gender roles assign certain tasks and responsibilities to men and women in families and societies as per the values and assumptions of a particular culture. The novel underscores certain fissures in the execution of those roles and responsibilities. To illustrate this point we can look at the roles played by characters like Liesel Meminger, Hans Huberman and Rosa Huberman. These characters challenge traditional understanding of gender roles and offer new ways of looking at gender. This helps to establish that gender is a matter of performance and gender roles are not fixed as they undergo change and can be questioned.

The characters behave in one way during the time of the war but they start behaving differently after the plot goes on unfolding. The main character Liesel was separated from her family and father at an early age of only 10. Her brother died and her mother ended up in a concentration camp. As Liesel is exposed to different kinds of difficulties she grows more brave and intelligent. The holocaust forces her to change her behavior as she has to face many ups and downs in her life. Likewise, Liesel's foster mother Rosa Huberman starts embodying masculine character. Her actions and behavior place her beyond the narrow boundaries of stereotypical definition of femininity. She performs different roles in different situations. The war forced women to work outside the narrow domain of domesticity and women characters

began to perform roles not envisioned traditionally.

Hans Huberman is a male but acts like a female character. He is more generous and patient. He is very affectionate and sympathetic. He cares for Liesel the way a mother nurtures her baby. Like a responsible mother he looks after her education and teaches her how to read. This proves that gender roles are not natural categories but social constructs based on the action and behavior of real human beings and these roles change with the change in society. They are open to change and challenge and not predetermined. This idea can best be explained by the theoretical notion of gender trouble propounded by Judith Butler. Her main contention is that gender is not something in born but a matter of performance of certain roles assigned to both males and females in society. There is a fluctuation in the performance of these roles because no two performances are ever exactly the same. In addition, the same character may perform different roles in different circumstances.

Theory and Textual Analysis

Gender basically implies roles and activities that society considers appropriate for both men and women. In this sense, it is a socially constructed concept or category. The novel is set in Germany where women were in charge of household chores before the advent of the Second World War. Males were supposed to provide economic support for the family and it demanded that they worked outside the confines of domesticity. Women were considered to be submissive, weak and fragile while men were taken as strong, determined, robust and brave. However these conventional gender roles came apart during the time of the Holocaust. It brought changes in gender roles. It refers to the fluidity of the notion of gender which for Butler is a porous category. For her: The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of body and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. The formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as constituted social temporality. (191)

This quote from Butler's book reveals that gender is not biological but a socially constituted category. The concept of gender is changeable and unstable. Since it is not inborn it is always possible that women can act in a masculine way and men can act in a feminine way. In the same vein, for David Glover and Cora Kaplan "both sex and gender are cultural categories that refer to way of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationship. Our relationship to ourselves and other" (17). Gender roles change and cultural assumptions affect our conception and understanding of gender roles. These roles change with change in time and place. Traditional societies were more parochial and closed which didn't allow much change and shift in gender roles. In today's open and troubled society, fluctuation in gender roles takes place easily and new circumstances force these transformations.

If we look at the novel *The Book Thief* we can see changes in gender roles. The war is primarily responsible for this kind of shift. Liesel's foster mother shouts at her husband as if

she is commanding him to follow a certain order. Asking him to come back on time she cried out “Don’t be home too late.” Not so loud; he turned and called back. “Sakurel!clickmysruse! I will speak as louder as I want!” (12). It is unexpected that a wife should be addressing her husband this way. Sakurel is not apolitically correct word to be used by a wife for her husband. Before the war one could not imagine a wife scolding a husband. Rosa works hard to earn money for running the family. She acts the boss in the family. *The Book Thief* is a historical fiction and peeps into the then German society and the changes it underwent due to the Second World War.

We can link the actions and activities of some of the characters with Judith Butler’s ideas of gender as performance which denies gender any fixity and stability. Her idea that “Gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as exgender” (8) goes against the stability of gender roles and categories. The relations between Hans Huberman and Rose can be used to illustrate this point. Hans is kind hearted, lovable and emotional while Rosa is strong and independent. Unlike, what convention has to say, Rosa earns money and has decision making power in her own hands. After the holocaust stability of gender roles changed over time because of the changing social and cultural roles given to males and females as they are affected by the experiences and performance of characters. Hans is very loving and caring foster father of Liesel Meminger. Rosa, on the contrary, is less caring and more practically oriented. It does not necessarily mean that she doesn’t love Liesel. Males perform feminine roles and female perform masculine roles. In this way, the novel challenges traditional concept of gender roles.

According to traditional gender stereotypes females are subordinated to males but *The Book Thief* questions this hierarchy by reversing the gender roles of characters. Rosa is rough both in her use of language and manner. This is the reason why her family members hate her for her unusual behavior towards them. Rosa is the head of the family and acts very bravely and fearlessly. She performs masculine roles. On the contrary, her husband is more caring, passionate and very close to his daughter. He is not educated and can’t earn money. There is neither “essence” that gender express there is no externalized objective idea to which gender aspires. Gender is not a fact but a series of acts which help to define the idea of gender. When these actions of characters change, the idea of gender roles also changes automatically.

For Kaplan and Glover “Gender has been used as a chameleon-like category, a name for a constantly changing phenomenon that can sometimes be more and sometimes also rather less than an identity” (82). It indicates that gender roles are in a state of constant flux because despite being a male Hans’ behavior towards Rosa is not strict as a traditional man’s. Man himself seems to place a woman at the top of the hierarchy. It shows that gender is a matter of performance. How a person performs his/her roles determines the gender identity of that person. Therefore, gender roles are not predetermined and are shaped by how the concerned people perform their roles in constantly changing social and cultural contexts. Liesel’s biological father abandons her and joins the war. Her biological mother works hard to find a foster home for her children. To search for her husband she entrusts her children to a

foster home and goes to war. Usually, a father is responsible for the food and education of the children. In the novel, Liesel's mother takes on masculine responsibilities and performs roles that are usually expected from a male parents. For Tim Crrigan, Bob Connel and John Lee: Relative to the total culture as a whole, the masculine personality tends more to the predominance of instrumental interests, needs and functions presumably in whatever social system both sexes are involved, while the feminine personality tends more to the primacy of expressive interests, needs and functions. One could expect, by and large, that other things being equal men would assume technical, executive and "judicial" roles, women more supportive, integrative and tension-managing" roles. (102)

Change is the fundamental principle of nature. With this transformation, the roles played by men and women also undergo changes. Liesel's mother sends her children to foster parents and supports her husband during the holocaust. She is courageous, active and challenges conventional notion of gender according to which women are seen as passive, docile and fragile. She challenges the idea of motherhood by acting as a fatherly figure. Rosa also performs masculine roles and challenges her irresponsible husband and attacks his position in the house. She manages the entire house with whatever little money she earns during the time of the holocaust. She has the courage and the determination to face the harsh realities of life during the difficult time of the war.

Furthermore, as necessity arises she is able to fight, defeat and keep her husband on the right track. She knows how to control her husband and daughter. She makes them move according to her commands and desires. Liesel is also a very resourceful lady because she steals books from different sources and educates herself with the help of Hans and through the force of her own desire and determination. In *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust* Anna Reading shows the pathetic condition of the Jews like, "First the men and women are divided . . . husbands and wives are separated, mothers waves to their sons for the last time . . . Now SS Doctor begins to segregate those who are fit to work, in his opinion, for those who are not" (44). Similar things happen in Liesel's life. She is separated from her father, mother and brother, she is like a helpless child in the beginning. Despite all this she starts going to school and has to study with juniors to learn alphabet. Nevertheless, she seems superior to her male friends. She is rebellious in her behavior with her friends. As the plot unfolds Liesel's personality begins from a conventional female and slowly and gradually it is transformed into a more masculine type. Because of holocaust she loses her parents and brother and has to go away from her own hometown. Despite all these hurdles she continues to pursue her dream. She is helpless and her eyes are filled with tears. She can't read a book in front of the class and a boy bullies her but she resists him.

In the break, she was taunted. A boy name Ludwily Schmwiki came up to her with a book. 'Hey', Liesel, he asked her, I am having trouble with this word. Could you read for me ? He laughed a ten-year-old smugness laughter. "You Dammkopf (you idiot!). Clouds were filling in now, big and clumsy and more kids were calling out to her, watching her seethe. (82) the boy, insults vulnerable Liesel and for the first time she was determined to take action against him. She attacks him in reversal of the roles conventionally assigned to

her as a female which echoes Halberstam. “But, what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both males and females” (2). The novel *The Book Thief* is a reflection of the same reality. Liesel’s classmate shows his masculinity towards her and as a consequence she attacks him.

She threw it away and kicked him as hard. She hit him in the vicinity of the groin. He was punched in the ear, when he landed, he was set upon. When he was set upon he was slapped and clawed and obliterated by a girl who was utterly consumed by rage . . . you Sakure !her voice too was able to scare him . . . “ you arschloch, can you spell arschlock for me ?” (83)

This is a clear challenge to conventional gender roles and a kind of questioning of the fixity and stability of the categories of gender. After that incident no one ever dares to tease Liesel in the school. She is as brave as a boy in thought to be. No one comes to argue with her. For Halberstam “female masculinity is a specific gender with its own cultural history” (77). Despite being a girl she goes to school with a boy named Rudy and plays football with boys. She possesses masculine traits and is not even afraid of Hitler she told her father, “I hate the Fuhrer” (124). In the country of Hitler she has the courage to raise voice in the favor and support of the Jews.

Conventionally men are supposed to be head of the family and decision makers. Hans is more like a mother to Liesel as he encourages her to read and give late night lessons. He confesses that he is not a good reader. Many times he tried to read in front of Liesel but realized the futility of his attempts” as he realized the difficulty of the test, he was clearly aware that such a book was hardly ideal” (68). Being a kind hearted Nazi he gives shelter to the young Jewish boy named Max during the holocaust. Hans is male by birth but his activities and performances tend more towards the feminine. He is insulted by his own son.

With his son gone, Hans Hubermann stood for a few moments longer. The street looked so big. When he reappeared inside, mama fixed her gaze on him, but no words were exchanged. She didn’t admonish him at all, which as you know, was highly unusual. Perhaps she decided he was injured enough, having been labeled a coward by his own son. For a while, he remained silently at the table after the eating was finished. Was he really a coward as his son had so brutally pointed out ? (115)

Hans is insulted by his son in front of all the family members. For his son, Hans is not good Nazi because he is no good supporter of Hitler and does not take part in the war. According to conventions Hans is a male but his activities and performances in the novel help to define him as feminine. Similarly, Max, a twenty year old man hides from the Jews and is guilt ridden over having abandoned his family. He is a pathetic character and has to rely on Hubermann’s family. Instead of managing the finances of the family he leaves his widowed mother alone and runs away from his responsibilities.

Conclusion

To sum up, *The Book Thief* presents a reversal of gender roles during the time of the Second World War. The novel seems to contend that gender is not stable and is open to

change according to time and situation. The central character Liesel is bold and strong and lives with her foster parents. She demonstrates masculine traits. Similarly male characters in the novel act feminine. Hans Huberman looks and behaves more like a female. He takes care of Liesel like a mother nurtures her baby. His wife Rosa is more masculine and earns and runs the family during the difficult time of the holocaust. Max leaves his mother alone and hides in another family. These examples show that gender roles are neither fixed nor stable. Gender is more a matter of performance and the gender of person is not innate but depends on the roles he/she performs in society. In this way, the novel serves to critique the notion of stable gender and relegates it to the domain of performance.

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