

# Language of Power and Power of Language in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak

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**Abstract**—“Even death has a heart”. The quote said by the narrator and personified Death in the novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak is of utmost significance not only for the terse, rhetorical and startling appeal but also for metaphoric conveyance for having even the slightest of compassion and sympathy. Besides being the personified narrator, Death is a prevalent theme in the text that subtly intersects and is expressed via the impeccable power and importance of words, eloquence, diction, and poetic phrasing to shape and shade the opinion of the readers only to acknowledge that how the world of words can be exploited for purgation, power and propaganda. Through the language only Liesel, the protagonist, besides other female characters can cope up with the brutalities of war and raise her voice offering resistances by the female world. The title *The Book Thief* not only steals the show by meticulous manifestation of the word power being the central theme of the work but also arrests the attention of any serious reader to observe how the female characters use the diction to resist the inhuman inflictions.

**Index Terms**— Death, Language, Words, Resistance, Feminism, War, Resistance, Discrimination.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak is a historical fictional story set in Germany and narrated by a personified but compassionate Death as narrator who tells about Liesel Meminger, a girl growing up in Germany during World War II who steals books, learns to read, and finds solace in words. She and Max, the Jew her family protects, are the only main characters that survive the war. The novel is an appealing saga encapsulating themes of cruelty, kindness, death and the power of language.

The title of the novel *The Book Thief* itself is captivating and at once entices the reader to presume the contents of the novel in relation to knowledge, literacy, education, diction and learning. Liesel Meminger, a nine-year-old German girl and the protagonist of the novel *The Book Thief*, lived with her family in the outskirts of Munich, Germany during the World War period. Despite of the war time when everyone was running for life Liesel becomes bibliophile and is enchanted by the power of words and falls in love with books as books help her to develop relationship with others. Told through the point of view of death, *The Book Thief* provides a moving story about how Liesel learns the true meaning of family through her caring new family, and about relationships.

Throughout the novel the influence of language and power of words is prevalent. From the negative impact of the anti-Semitic propaganda present in Nazi Germany to the reassuring effect of Liesel's reading in the bomb shelter, words have both a positive and negative influence on the major characters. The presence or absence of words in the novel cleverly exemplifies the power, impression and utility of words to galvanize, influence, threaten and spellbound masses. The metaphoric pattern and symphony of the novel also enhances the linguistic prowess.

Setting of the novel is Germany during World War II, and ipso facto the abhorrence for certain people expressed via the derogatory influence of words is clearly observed, specifically in the anti-Semitic sentiments. Contemporaneously, "Jewry was...a label"). People were further labeled by slurs like Jewish Filth painted on their homes and shops. The Jews were referred to as a "disease" infecting the country. These labels insulted, injured and incapacitated the Jewish, lessening others' moral turmoil regarding crimes against them. The tirades against the Jewish ensured to deprive and deprave the community from an ordinary human life.

There are many instances in the novel where words are used rather misused to abuse and affront. Hans, foster father of the protagonist Liesel, puts risks life and reputation when he paints over a slur on a Jewish shop. There is inherent power in the act of addressing; the Nazis claimed this power over the Jews by propagating derogatory names. Hans, in refusing to use or accept the slurs, refuses to acknowledge this power, and weakens its effect. His refusal also makes it clear his actions will not be influenced by propaganda, and are therefore unpredictable, risky. Hans is only ever harsh to Liesel on two occasions, the first being when she says, "I hate the Führer" (Führer is the term used for Hitler and his policies throughout the novel) He sympathizes with the sentiment, but knows if the wrong person heard those words, they would put Liesel in danger. If people cannot direct their hatred toward their leader, for fear of personal harm, that leader can use their silence as an indicator of consent and can feel secure in his position because without words, no one can challenge him. The second time Hans is harsh to Liesel is when he tells her how important it is to keep Max a secret; he threatens to burn her books. So, the words, "There's a Jew in

my basement” would destroy the books that taught her the power of words in the first place.

Both Government and politics too do not remain untouched by the word power. Any words that identify a person as something undesirable to the ruling party carry risk with them. Liesel knows only one thing about his father; he was a Communist. She comes to understand later that this label meant punishment, as communism is one of the “evil machinations” infecting the country, according to the Nazis. Max recognizes how “Jew” has also become a dangerous word, and that it endangers not only himself, but those who try to help him. Jew is a label for those who “violate the German ideal”. Thus, those Germans who would help them are practically guilty of treason. These few assigned labels proliferate, gathering increasingly negative connotations, until a single word carries thousands of words worth of cultivated hatred and fear. Ironically this atmosphere of detestation and contempt is state sponsored, state propagated, and state supervised.

Max Vandenburg, a Jew, shares with Liesel respect for words. words. Max writes books for Liesel about all that she has done for him and about how her words and tears are able to save him and give him strength. Learning to read brings Liesel closer to the understanding that Hitler's propaganda is the root of his power and the reason why her mother, father, and brother are dead. Reading, particularly reading of writings of Max makes Liesel happy throughout the novel. In Max's allegory "*The Word Shaker*", he sees Hitler as having decided to "rule the world with words" and calls Germany "a nation of farmed thoughts". The seed of a thought – that Germany would be made better if the Jews were eliminated – can be cultivated through forms of mass communication like speeches, books, or radio. In Max's daydreams, he faces off against Hitler in a boxing ring. Max lands a solid blow, only for Hitler to call out to the audience of Germans, reminded them that Jews are an infestation, and imploring them to “climb up into this ring” and “defeat this enemy together”. Hitler, an elegant speaker, uses words to seduce, influence, and mobilize an entire nation. Liesel says it most aptly: “Without words, the Führer (Hitler) is nothing”.

The passages with the dictionary also illustrate that sometimes words are not enough; no definition will describe certain feelings precisely. Ilsa Hermann gives Liesel a dictionary, and that section of the book is filled with definitions & related words. At times, the meaning suggested by the dictionary is “completely and utterly mistaken” (398), particularly its suggested synonyms. When Hans is drafted, his goodbye is wordless and resigned. Rosa, a loud, swearing presence in the Hubermann house, is so distraught that when Hans goes to war that she falls silent, and the life seems to go out of her. The same happened to the mayor's wife when her son died. For these women, words are inadequate to describe their grief. Liesel, at her lowest moment, asks, “What good

are the words?”. Liesel ends up writing the story of her life, ending with the line, "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right." This line conveys Liesel's realization of the manipulative power of words and indicates her attempt to master the art of writing for compassionate use, to make words "right."

While *The Book Thief* explores the ways that words can hurt as well as heal, the message is ultimately hopeful. Death has carried around Liesel's book, *The Book Thief*, and her words, “so damning and brilliant” have given him a new view of the human race, “so ugly and so glorious” (550). Death notes that though he serves villains and disasters, there are moments and stories he allows to distract him, and *The Book Thief* is one such story. For Liesel, even as words took her mother away from her, endangered her best friend, and isolated her when they were beyond her grasp, words were what connected her to the people she loved. Words were powerful enough to save her, in the end

Amid the world of words, the character and narrator of the book is Death who uses the words so effectively that the book has its own merits from the narration and experimentation point of view. Being the narrator he (Death) is fascinated by humans and the colors of the world but struggles throughout the novel to decipher how humans are capable of so much ugliness and so much beauty. He takes an interest in Liesel and her story, and he believes that Liesel's story is one of a handful of beautiful stories he possesses. Throughout the novel, Death often provides humorous, informative, or dark asides. He also likes to skip around in the story's timeline, revealing events to come and then apologizing for giving parts of the story away. He steers the story with a heavy hand. While his commentary often focuses on his perception of humans, he also works to correct humans' perception of him, revealing that he does have a heart, that he doesn't carry a scythe, and that he, in fact, appears quite human. He describes how he must do the bidding of many different bosses — these humans like Hitler who exterminate and bring war to others.

## II. CONCLUSION

The novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak is one of those rare works of historical fiction that beautifully incorporates and expresses the vital and subtle themes of the universal appeal. Challenging the pre-established traditional norms of story telling the novel uses Death as a personified character who via a female character Liesel lucidly and charismatically describes the influence of language and learning to face the trauma of discrimination injustice and inhuman inflictions. Further, the book puts forth that goodness is always possible even in the most adverse conditions of evil and tragedies. Despite of the multiple tragedies including deaths the protagonist has a firm belief that virtue can always withstand evil.

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