

Reversal of Conventional Gender Roles in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

This research is an investigation of the reversal of conventional gender roles in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* through the theoretical perspective of gender studies. Conventional gender role refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in families, societies and culture. Going through Zusak's *The Book Thief*, readers come across various questions and gaps. The questions can be placed at the way characters perform their gender roles in various scenes of the novel. Some instances can be taken of the characters like Liesel Meminger, Hans Hubermann and Rosa Hubermann. While reading this text, the questions can be raised as, do they follow the conventional pattern of gender roles? Or do they challenge such stereotypes and establish a new way of dealing with gender issue?

Various characters in the novel perform their gender roles in different ways. Basically, most of the characters do not follow the traditional modes of gender roles during the Holocaust. As the plot develops the major characters start to behave differently. Liesel Meminger was almost ten years old when she was separated from her family and her father. In between her brother died and mother was brought to a concentration camp. Here, Liesel is exposed to difficulties and she gets brave, bold and intelligent. She gradually attains masculine characteristics. And again at the age of fifteen she loses her foster parents when the bomb hits the camp. The Holocaust changes her behaviors as she has to be strong to face her life. So, she gradually gets masculine characters. Before the holocaust women were supposed to work inside the home and males used to earn to run their family. Contrary to this, Liesel is brave, intelligent and hard worker and lives with foster parents. War forces parents to leave their children hands her daughter to foster parents. Similarly next character Liesel's

foster mother Rosa Huberman starts embodying masculine character. She is equivalent to male. She is short woman with a rough exterior. She is like a male and beyond the boundary of stereotypical definition of feminine character. She performs several behaviors in variable case. In German, women who had never worked outside the home were forced to work to sustain their children and husbands during the war time. She does the washing and ironing for many of Molching's wealthy inhabitants. Rosa, time and again insults both Liesel and Hans for their incompetence around the house.

On the other hand, Hans Huberman behaves more in a feminine pattern. He is generous, kind and patient like a woman. He is immediately sympathetic and remains that way to the end. He cannot stand to see people in pain. He loves Liesel and she feels safe in Hans's arms. For example, he nurtures Liesel like her mother. He always goes to Liesel's room and teaches her to study. Dealing with the behaviors performances of all major characters, it directly challenges the traditional modes of gender roles. This is the idea Judith Butler discusses in *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. This claims that no human being occupies the masculine and feminine quality and roles by birth. So, a female can perform masculine roles and a male also can have feminine roles. They are not predetermined.

The Book Thief narrated by death is the story of nine years old German girl named Liesel Meminger, who lived with her foster parents named Hans and Rosa Hubermann in the small town of Molching in 1939, shortly before the world war second. On their way to Molching, Liesel's younger brother Werner dies and she is traumatized, experiences nightmares about him for months. She cannot read at the beginning. But with the help of her foster father who is a painter and accordion player she learns to study the book and goes to the school. Liesel trusts her foster father and

she feels safe with his presence. Liesel is a book thief; she steals ten books from different places. She goes to school with her neighborhood boy named Rudy Steiner, who is interested with Liesel. Her biological father and mother were communists. On Hitler's birthday the town celebrates burning books and other things. Liesel sees some of the books in the fire have not been burned completely, so she captures one among them. She realizes that due to Hitler her father and mother are far from her that is why she starts to hate Hitler. She knows that the person who is responsible for the Holocaust is an Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi party.

Hans meets a German Jew named Erick Vandenburg, Max's father his accordion master. With the help of Liesel Hans agrees to hide a Jew named Max vandenburg in Erik's in his basement. Liesel writes the story of her life in the Huberman's basement with the encouragement of Iisa, The Mayor's wife. Liesel lost all her family members and her friends like Hans, Rosa and everyone else on her block. She and Max survive the war. Later she goes to Australia and lives a long life with her children and grandchildren happily. This book is about how a young girl survives horrific circumstances and tries herself to make better life for herself and those around her. It is a story of survival.

This is a story of nine year young girl Liesel who struggles to live in Germany during the holocaust. In this regard, various critics have reviewed Zukas's novel from various angles. Most of the critics have viewed this book as a child novel, holocaust testimony, and trauma fiction. Hence, this study attempts to analyze the novel from the perspective of gender studies.

The critic John Green in his article "Fighting for Their Lives" talks about the nature of Liesel;

She commits her first theft at her brother's funeral, taking "the Grave Digger

Handbook,” which had fallen on the ground. Hans teaches her to read it at night. While Liesel sometimes joins up with a gang to steal the like, her only thieving passion is for books. Not good books or bad books just books. From her bedroom to the bomb shelter down the road, reading helps her commune with the living and the dead. (5)

Liesel has hunger for knowledge. She is brave and intelligent but takes the book from different place. Her dedication and hard work to read a book takes towards her destination. She reaches to her destination and writes book. So, her intimacy with books helps her to cope up with her difficulties too.

Philip Constable, another critic in *New York Journal* states that “*The Book Thief* cleverly inverts the commonly accepted position of history. It leaves us asking who writes the history and how accurate the history books really are we are trained to believe that all of Germany was complicated in the atrocities of the war and to some it was”(4).

During the Holocaust all of Germany suffered from war. Like other history book, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak also gives the same idea of history and difficulties Jews faced during the Holocaust. This book is written from Zusak’s parents story when they were at Germany during the Holocaust.

In *The Independent Culture*, Marianne Brace insists that “Zusak gives us all you would expect in a novel about wartime Germany: Hungry children pinching food, book burning and bombing attacks. But his is to make Death is narrator. *The Book Thief* is a real depiction of the Holocaust through the novel. It shows clear picture of a war through the narrating vice of a Death” (13).

Likewise another critic Jenni Adams in her article “Into Eternity’s Certain Breadth Ambivalent Escapes in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*” states

While the young readership of Zusak's novel is more readily identifiable as young adult rather than child, however, it should be noted that in the context of Holocaust discourse, the notion of youth is inextricably bound up with the idea of innocence, an idea which renders the figure of the (imagined) co-reader in Holocaust crossover texts susceptible to a particular kind of stylization. (228)

The intended readers of Markus Zusak's novel are young adult readers rather than child. This book provides the idea of Holocaust to the imagined reader very carefully. Another critic Philip Ardagh claims:

It gives a unique and compassionate voice to a narrator who can comment on human's inhumanity to human without being ponderous, 'Worthy' or even quite understanding us at times. This is a beautifully balanced piece of storytelling with glimpse of what is yet to come: sometimes misleading, sometimes all too true. We meet all shades of German, from truly committed Nazis to the likes of Hans Hubermann. Zusak is no apologist, but able to give a remarkable insight into the human psyche (19).

The Book Thief is definitely different from other Holocaust fiction. Through this literary work Zusak tries to show the real situation of Germany during the Holocaust. And here, Death as a narrator comments on the wrong deeds of human beings.

These critics have viewed the novel from several angles. However, none has till the date, analyzed from the issue of Gender reversal during the Holocaust. Given criticisms mostly emphasize the Holocaust Trauma, ethical representation of trauma, historical testimony. None has systematically analyzed the issue of reversal of gender roles in the novel.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors activities that a

given society considers appropriate for man and woman. Generally, women in Germany were primarily in charge of housekeeping and taking care of children, while the men were responsible for the families' economic support. Men and women were equipped with the very different skills and knowledge. The treatment of the male was very different from that of female. There was discrimination against the females. Females were taken as submissive, weak and fragile and at the same time men were taken as brave, strong and rulers of the nation, society and home. The Holocaust not only affected the trauma and memory, but of gender role as well. As members of patriarchal society, people are programmed with stereotypes about what it means to be woman or a man, and they are raised to perform whatever gender is assigned to us. But during the holocaust the conventional gender roles got dismantled. Most of the societies of the world are guided by the conventional rules and regulations. Women start to run the house. They start to go outside to earn money. Because during the holocaust man had to fulfill their duty by participating in the war. Holocaust brought changes in gender roles.

Conventionally, human beings are categorized into two different genders men and women, and are accordingly assigned different social roles to be performed by them. These roles, in turn, help them to have different experiences of life. In contrast to relative stability of sex, gender changes over time because of the changing social or cultural roles assigned to genders are constantly shaped by the experiences of the performance of those roles. Sex is unalterable, permanent and biological origin which refers to the physical differences of the body, whereas gender is socially constructed roles and responsibilities assigned to males and females based on the perceived differences of the sexes themselves. Notion of gender is challenged by the gender studies.

This research makes use of gender studies in order to excavate the gender roles during the holocaust in the Zusak's *The Book Thief* with the help of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, David Glover and Cora Kaplan *Genders* and *The Masculinity Studies Reader* edited by Rachel Adams and David Savran. The book *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler is regarded as the ground breaking text for gender issues. She states:

The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the 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 a constituted *social temporality*. (191)

According to her, gender is not biological; it is constituted by the society. The concept of gender is unstable and fragile. Gender is not an inborn quality. Female could be masculine and man could be feminine with their performances. Gender is determined by the act of every individual. Here, *Genders* by David Glover and Cora Kaplan insist that

Sex and gender are therefore intimately related, but not because one is 'natural' while the other represents its transformation into 'culture'. Rather, *both* are inescapably *cultural* categories that refer to ways of describing and understating human bodies and human relationship, our relationship to ourselves and other. (17)

Sex and gender roles go through transformation. The roles of male and female are not as the same like the past. Gender roles are determine by the territory and cultural

assumptions. The roles of sex and gender are changeable. So they are different from the conventional thought. They change according to change in time and place. Judith Halberstam in her book *Female Masculinity* writes:

Far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. In other words, female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing. But what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies. (1-2)

Halberstam challenges the conventional notion of gender roles. Female can show her masculine power as like male. Masculinity is not only for male, females also have masculine character as men. We can see many examples in the society that despite being females also many women play very important role to run their family. But at the same time despite being males they perform weak attitude toward their family. In gender reversal man is weak, submissive, passive, emotional and female is brave, intelligent, strong, hardworking and fearless. In the *Masculinities Studied Reader*, editors Rachel Adams and David present this interdisciplinary field as

Taking its lead from feminism, masculinity studies is thus dedicated to analyzing what has often seemed to be an implicit fact, that the vast majority of societies are patriarchal and that men have historically enjoyed more than their share power, resources, and cultural authority. Focusing critical interrogation on men, patriarchy and formations of masculinity. (2)

In a similar way, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak helps to study the gender roles during the Holocaust. It attempts to find out the female roles and male roles during

the atrocity of Holocaust. It shows how gender role changed from the traditional gender roles.

This research analyzes how Markus Zusak subverts conventional gender roles in *The Book Thief*. Generally, women are mainly in charge of housekeeping and taking care of children, while men are responsible for the families' economic support. there is work division among them. In conventional gender stereotype, females are supposed to be weaker than males and as a result, females were always under the control of males. But, during the Holocaust men were taken away from their families and communities. *The Book Thief* changes from the perspective of Death.

The book presents the horror of the Holocaust during the World War II. Death shows different types of color images to create the atmosphere of the Holocaust. Here Death narrates, "The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places it hasburned. There were black crumbs and pepper, streaked across the redness" (13).The black color represents the events of the world during the Holocaust. The entire novel revolves around the ten years old girls named Liesel. Women were left with the children and they were the decision makers of the house.

Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam and Cora Kaplan, Rachal Adams and David Savran are some of the prominent theorists of gender studies. In this regard Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* states, that "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understand as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movement and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an avidly gendered self" (19). Here, according to Judith Butler, our gender is not natural. It is known through our style and bodily gestures. In *The Book Thief*,Liesel's foster mother Rosa Hubermann acts like a man rather than a female:

As he walked up Himmel street Mama would open the window and cry out,

“Don’t be home too late”“Not so loud; he turned and called back.

“Sakurel! Lick my ruse! I’ll speak as louder I want! The echo of her swearing followed him up the street. He never looked back, or at least, not until he was sure his wife was gone. (42)

Sakurel itself is not good word for husband or anyone else. Before the Holocaust people even could not imagine these types of words to scold their husband. Rosa earns money to run the family. *The Book Thief* is a historical fiction which represents Holocaust and different political and social issues of Germany. Zusak was inspired by his parents and in the same way he wrote the *The Book Thief* by listening to his mother; Lisa grew up in Germany similarly, his father Helmut from Austria. In an interview with Chicago publication he said that it is a story of his parents and their childhood in Germany and Austria. This book is a blend of fact and fiction. Zusak’s words in the novel are very powerful and the main character Liesel also understood the power of words in the plot. Once Liesel knows how to read, she starts loving the books and the words and steals many books in her life. And she also utilizes the power of the words in the bomb shelter; she used to study loudly to calm the people around her.

The setting of this book is Germany in the fictional town of Molching from 1939 to 1942. Before the Holocaust women and men were not treated equal. Women were not given any chance like a man. But Zusak tries to show the reversal of the conventional gender roles through this novel. Women were taken as useless and weak characters in the society. But not only males, women also suffered a lot during a time. In, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust*, Anna states that

The expectation was that the Nazis would respect usual gender boundaries: people believed that they would murder Jewish men but would allow those perceived caregivers and the vulnerable to survive. Infact, the situation was the reverse. The woman and the vulnerable including the elderly, children and babies, were the first to be taken to the forest and shot, while the men were taken to work camps. (qtd in Reading 62)

The Holocaust represents the genocide against the Jews and ended with millions of people being killed which was systematically planned and carried out by German Nazis. Jews were the main target of Nazis. The condition of women and children was more pathetic than that of males.

Frau Diller was a sharp-aged woman with far glasses and a nefarious glare. In addition, “She developed the evil look to discourage the very idea of stretchy from the shop, which she occupied with solider like posture, a refrigerated voice and even breathe that smelled like hell-Hitler” (51). Despite being a woman, she acts like a male. We can say that she is strong. Her bodily gestures show she is very strong Nazi woman. She has no fear of anyone because she is walking in Hitler’s path. She is a loyal supporter of the Nazi and has a framed photo of Hitler hanging behind her counter because Nazis were the most powerful people during the holocaust. Many Jews lost their relatives, parents, children and home shelter; we can say that Jews ruined their entire life during the Holocaust. Here Helene Stone Young a Jewish woman remembers her days inside the camps as she states:

My brother came one time and he must have told my husband how I looked because I looked really terrible. At that time I was a typical *muselman* (camp slang for someone on verge of death).after typhoid fever, I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t hear, I was really just bones-bones and boils. I knew I was a musel-

mann. I didn't wash the place where we could wash was a far away and I had those ten toes with chilblains full of pus. I used to pee in the same bowl I ate from. How did I do that! I didn't kill the lice anymore, they were too many.

(qtd. in Lyn 281)

The Jews were fighting with their own life inside the camps. They were not treated as human beings. Jews were compelled to live a pathetic life inside the camps and outside too.

Many characters could be connected with Butler's line of argument:

"Originally intended to dispute the biology is destiny formulation the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have gender is culturally constructed; hence gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as ex gender"(8). Here the clash between Hans Hubermann and Rosa can be linked with Butler's idea. Hans is kind- hearted, lovable and emotional. On the other hand, Rosa is strong and independent. Rosa is not conventional because she earns money and makes decision of the home. Human beings are categorized into two different genders. Men and women are accordingly signed different social roles to perform by them. These roles, in turn, help them to have different experiences of life. After the holocaust relative stability of sex, gender roles change over time because of the changing social or cultural roles assigned to genders as they are constantly moulded by the experiences of the performances of those roles.

Each character plays a different gender role during the Holocaust. The major character Liesel Meminger lives with her foster parents Hans and Rosa Hubermann. Hans is very loving and caring foster father of Liesel Meminger. Rosa Hubermann, Liesel's foster mother does not show her love to Liesel because Rosa has to manage

all the things in the house she was traumatized because of the war. Judith Halberstam claims “what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies” (355). However, despite their differences, Hans and Rosa show their affection in different ways; both love Liesel with all their hearts and go out of their way to make her happy. Rosa sacrifices little money she makes from her washing and ironing job to buy Liesel’s two books on her birthday. So, Rosa has a big heart but because of the Holocaust she seems to have fallen into difficult.

Another character Rudy Steiner is the best friend and neighbor of Liesel with whom she goes to school. Max Vandenburg Liesel’s best friend who is Jew and son of Hans’s friend. It means a male is given the feminine role and a female performs the masculine role. In such a way this novel of Zusak also contributes to challenge the traditional notion of gender. “Think of mama: That was when the word struck her face like a slap. A repels grin. “SMUMENSCH” She shouted and papa roared with laughter’s than quantized” (70). Hans Hubermann and Liesel both are afraid of mama. Mama’s voice struck the voice of papa. Papa is weaker than mama.

In normal traditional stereotype, femininity is subordinated to masculinity and as a result, females are subjugated. But Zusak questions this notion by providing the reverse gender roles to his characters in *The Book Thief*. Rosa Hubermann is quite rough in her manner and words. That is why her family members hate her for her unusual behavior towards them.

Expressions of Butler are precisely reflected by the characters from Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. For instance, Rosa Hubermann becomes the head of the family and performs bravely. So, she performs masculine roles. But male character, her husband Hans is caring, passionate and very close to his daughter Liesel. Hans cannot earn

enough money and he is not well educated. Here in the lines of *The Book Thief* mama states:

“What did you say?”

“I think you heard me Rosa, mama laughed.” What the hell could you teach her?”

A cardboard grin. Uppercut words.

“Like you could read so much you saucers.”(73)

Here, Mama mocks at papa because he tries to teach Liesel. But she knows that he is not well educated and how could he help Liesel in her study. Because there is neither “essence” that gender expresses or externalized nor an objective idea to which gender aspires and because gender is not fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is that, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (190).

The novel entirely centers and moves around the struggle of women characters, particularly of Liesel, or her freedom and distinct identity in male dominated society. The female characters fight more specifically to achieve their identity in the self- realization and individualization in the Nazi society during the holocaust. At first, Liesel as a female was a very weak character in the novel. But after the death of her brother, her biological mother leaves her. We see rapid changes in her. Rosa has attacked the traditional male dominated patriarchal tendency by keeping masculine role over all her family members.

Similarly, Butler argues in her book *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. “Performativity is not a singular but a repetition and a ritual which achieved its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body understood in part as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (15). The reason of

these repetitive acts is holocaust in the conventional model of gender role of man. Male is taken as savior and guardian of the family. Rosa dares to go out from the house to earn money during the holocaust.

In opposition to Rosa Hubermann, Zusak's *The Book Thief* depicts another character named Hans who has got the ambiguous nature because by birth he is a male but his performance looks like feminine. He affrights with his wife "If we're any later, mama will kill us and we won't that do we? No more book stealing then" (138).

Cora Kaplan and David Glover in *Genders* state that "gender has figured as a chameleon-like category, a name for a constantly changing phenomenon that can sometimes be more and also sometimes rather less than an identity" (182). Here, gender roles change like chameleon and because being a man Hans's behavior towards Rosa is not strict as traditional man. Here man himself put woman at the top of the hierarchy. Here, gender is the matter of performance. How a person performs his/her behavior determines the gender of the person. So it is not predetermined that who has got masculine role and who has got feminine roles.

Liesel's biological father leaves and goes to the war. So, he does not come back. Here Liesel's biological mother realizes that "she wasn't delivering her children to the higher echelons of Munich, but a foster home had apparently been found, and if nothing else, the new family could at least feed the girl and the boy a little better, and educate them properly" (25). In order to find her husband, Liesel's biological mother gives her child to foster parents and goes to the war. Generally, father is responsible for the food and the education for the children. But her mother plays equal role as a father and gave her children to the foster parents. Tim Carrigan, Bob Conell and Jhon Lee argue:

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. We would expect, by and large, that other thing being equal, men would assume technical, executive and “judicial” roles, women more supportive, integrative and “tension –managing” roles. (102)

Changeability is the requirement of changing time. Both men and women play equal role. Here Liesel’s biological mother sends her children to foster parents and supports her husband during the Holocaust. Here, Liesel’s mother is courageous, brave and challenges conventional gender notion. Mother is taken as a nurturer of the baby. But, in the novel she tries to challenge the role of motherhood. Not only Liesel’s biological mother here Rosa and Hans’s children also live with another family. During the Holocaust it is very difficult them to live all family members in the same home. Rosa and Hans Children leave home to live and to make easy for their parents.

Characters perform their gender roles regardless of their sex in various ways. First of all Rosa performs masculine gender roles against and by challenging her irresponsible husband and conventional patriarchal male dominated society. She attacks her husband’s position in her house. By making depiction of these patterns of relation the novelist shows woman who are being capable of subverting traditional gender roles with their merciless, selfish seductive and opportunists natures. For example Rosa Hubermann seems masculine when she manages her house with little amount of money during the holocaust. According to Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, John Lee in *Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity* state that:

A contemporary ruling –class family is organized around the corporate a professional career of the husband. In typical case the well-groomed wife is subordinated not by being under the husband's thumb-he isn't in the house most of the time- but by her task of making sure his home life runs on wheels to support his self-confidence, his career advancement, and their collective income. (113)

Female also plays equal role to run the family. Without woman family is incomplete and female is always there to support and courage husband in the modern society.

Moreover, in the case of necessity she is able to fight, defeat and keep her husband on proper track and keep Hans and Liesel within her control a make the move around her commands and desires. Hence, the novel presents the gender roles through the characters tasks, functions and behaviors and roles attribute to man and woman in society. Liesel sees her brother death and brother is buried by two grave diggers. Before leaving another train, Liesel steals a black book from the cemetery ground she brings in Huberman's house, and hides it under the bed. The second book she steals from a Nazi book burning book named *The Shoulder Shrug*. And rests of the books were from Ilsa's library. She has hunger of knowledge that is why she repeatedly steals book from different places. Women are not given equally chance to study like a males but Liesel dares to steals books to gain knowledge. At the same time she is forced to live with her foster parents in new house Hans and Rosa Haubermann. Liesel ruin all her family members and house during the Holocaust.

In *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust* Anna Reading in her book shows the pathetic situation of Jews family "First the men and the women are divided...husbands and wives are separated, mothers wave to their sons for the last time...Now SS Doctor begins to segregate those who are fit for work, in his opinion,

for those who are not” (44). Same things happen in little Liesel’s life. First of all her father is separated from family. After sometimes she is also separated with her biological mother and also with her brother. In the beginning she is very helpless child. Rosa called *saumensch* (piggy girl) when she refuses to have a bath. For the first few months she suffers by a nightmare about her brother and wet the bed.

Despite being an uneducated child, she begins to go to school. She is forced to study with juniors to learn alphabet. Her foster mother sends her to school with Rudy. Liesel seems more superior to her male friends.

After all, Rudy hadn’t missed a penalty in eighteen shots, even when the opposition made a point of booting Tommy Muller out of goal. No matter who they replaced him with, Rudy would score. On this occasion, they tried to force Liesel out. As you might imagine, she protested, and Rudy agreed.

‘no, no,’ he smiled. ‘Let her stay’. He was rubbing his hands together. (49)

Liesel seems rebellious. She is not very sharp at study that is why she was bullied many times by her friends’. Liesel’s personality begins from conventional female and later transforms into masculine female. Because of The Holocaust she suffers from different difficulties like she loses her biological parents, brother and her home town. In spite of all these difficulties she always steps ahead to find her dream. At her school she fails to pronounce the words from her course book in front of her colleague. She picks up the book and opens it to a random page. “All right then,” said sister Maria. “You wanted to do it? Do it! Yes, sister, after a quick glance at Rudy, Liesel lowered her eyes and examined the page (81). Liesel dares to read the book in front of the class. Her teacher is not sure that whether she could read book properly or not. Teacher listens to her and let Liesel to read the book. But she fails to study. “Her blood lounded .The sentences blurred. The white page was suddenly written in

another tongue, and it didn't help that tears were now forming in her eyes. She even couldn't see the words anymore"(81). Her eyes are filling with tears. She is helpless in front of them. Because of this incident one of a boy of her class bullies her.

In the break, she was taunted. A boy named Ludwiy Schwiki came up to her with a book. 'Hey', Liesel', he asked her I'm having trouble with this word. Could you read for me? He laughed –a- ten-year old smugness laughter. "you Dummkopf (you-idiot!'. Clouds were filling in now, big and clumsy, and more kids were calling out to her, watching her seethe. (82)

Ludwiy insults pathetic lady who is very weak and vulnerable. For the first time she took action against him. She tries to dismantle the conventional role of gender by attacking him. According to Judith Halberstam "But, what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and females"(2).

Same thing happen in Liesel's story too. Heroic masculinity has been produce by both male and female in the *The Book Thief*. First of all class mate of Liesel shows his masculinity towards Liesel. Secondly Liesel attacks him

She threw it away and kicked him as hard. She could 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 utterly consumed Rage... "you sakurel! Here, voice, too was able to scrath him..." you arschloch Can you spell arschloch for me?". (83)

Conventional gender roles got reversed. It is very unconventional to hit the boy. But here being a female Liesel shows her masculine behavior. Everybody is amaze to see her. "Jesus, Marry and Joseph's, a girl commentated with a Shriek, 'she going to kill him!"(83). The situation seems embarrassed. After that incident no one ever dares to tease Liesel in the school. After attacking a boy Liesel announced, I'm not stupid, No-

one argued”(84). It means she is equally brave as man. No one come to argue in front of her. Here in *Female Masculinity* Judith Halberstam states that “female masculinity is a specific gender with its own cultural history”(77). We need not copy from male to have female masculinity. Female masculinity is special kind of gender which has its own cultural history. “She is bony but strong and has seen many things”(105).

Despite being a girl she goes school with a boy named Rudy and plays football with boys. “She spent her time playing football with Rudy and the other kids on Himmel Street”(77). She has no any female friend in the school.

She is a girl having masculine characteristics and not even afraid with Hitler. She comes to know that the main reason behind the war is Hitler. Because of him she has to live far from her parents and lost her brother. On the birthday of Hitler she says to her papa “I hate the Fuhrer; she said “I hate him;”(124). The word, “I hate him” is very courageous. During the Holocaust no one could utter these words but she tries. Here being a small girl it is very difficult to survive in the Munich. Being a small she shows her masculinity power in front of Jews who are the victim of the Holocaust. She raises the voice of Jews.

Judith Halberstam states that “a complex female masculinity, one that neither copies male homosexuality nor male heterosexuality but that carves out its own gender expression” (90). Female masculinity is not the copy of male homosexuality or heterosexuality female masculinity has its own gender. Here, Liesel shows her female masculinity. Holocaust changed Liesel from pathetic to courageous. Zusak’s novel *The Book Thief* challenges the conventional gender roles through different characters.

Women were always inside the house before the Holocaust. Smoking cigarette, drinking alcohols were the symbol of courageous males. Only men are supposed to drink and smoke openly. Liesel challenges this notion too. “Liesel

picked it up. She took his cigarette and put it in her mouth”(496). She shows manly behavior by picking cigarette and takes in her mouth. In conventional gender roles these products are made only for male. If females want to have them they can. Because of the holocaust women come out from the home and they start to experimenting new things. Here Rubin’s claim is that the formation of gender identity as an act of suppression and repression of natural similarities between sexes:

Men and women are, of course, different. But they are not as different as day and night, earth and sky, yin and yang, life and death...Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of ‘feminine’ traits; in women of the local definition of ‘masculine’ traits. The division of the sexes has the effect repressing some of the personality characteristics of virtually everyone, men and women. (qtd.in Glover and Kaplan 15-16)

On the other hand Hans who is accordion player is another major male character of the Zusak’s novel. Accordion is a symbol of hope and comfort to Liesel during the Holocaust. Hans is a very kind to Liesel and to everybody else. He is caring and generous throughout the whole story. Liesel and Hans seem very close in this novel. He is very sweet and kind; he is the perfect support system for Liesel.

In conventional gender roles men are supposed to be the master of the house and decision maker. Hans is the second mother of the Liesel because like a mother Hans encourages Liesel to read and gives late night lessons. The novel narrated by death explains that “to tell you the truth: papa explained up front, “I am not such a good reader myself”(67). Hans confesses that he is not good in reading. He is so honest to everyone in the novel. But he tries many times to read in front of Liesel but

“as he realized the difficulty of the text, he was clearly aware that such a book was hardly ideal. There were words in there that he’d have troubled with himself”(68). He is always there for her when she suffers from nightmares about her brother’s passing. After apart from the family Hans is the one person whom Liesel loves the most, Hans also treats her like his own child and teaches her many things about life. “Leave her alone’. His gentle voice made its way in, as if slipping through a crowd. ‘Leave her to me. He moved closer and sat on the floor, against the wall”(33). The love between Hans and Liesel is like a biological father and daughter. He plays accordion which is a symbol of relationship for Hans with Jewish man. Being a kind hearted and Nazi he gives shelter to the young Jewish boy named Max during the Holocaust. Hans is born male but his activities and performances shows that he is a character that who is a male having with feminine character during the Holocaust. Hans 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 inured enough, having been labeled a coward by his only 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’s son insults Hans in front of all family members. According to his son Hans is not a good Nazi because Hans is not good supporter of Hitler and does not take part in the war. Father is known as the head of the family. It was unacceptable to point out father’s mistakes in the conventional society. But due the Holocaust and his mother’s behavior towards her husband makes -easier to scold father in front of everyone. In

An Introduction to Female Masculinity: Masculinity without Men Judith Halberstam

insists:

I claim that far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. In other words, female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing. But, what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies. (20)

Conventional society believes that male only has masculinity power in their body.

Female masculinity has been rejected every time but Halberstam believes that both

male and female both have masculinity. So, in Zusak's plot Hans Hubermann is a

Nazi man who refuses to take part in the World War II. Hans gives shelter to the Jews

Max. According to the conventional society Hans is a man with masculine power but

here Zusak presents him as a male who has feminine characteristics in the entire

novel.

Max, a twenty-three years young man, hides from the Nazis. He has guilt

over leaving his family. He is a son of Hubermann friend's named Erick, die on war.

He is also pathetic character of *The Book Thief* because during the holocaust there as

shortage of food in the Germany. Many people died because of starvation. At that

time he is living with the Huberman's family. But later he comes to know that he is a

burden of Hubermann family:

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph”, Rosa muttered. ‘Another one.’

Turning round, Max apologized. His words were slippery and smell, quelled

by the acid. ‘I’m sorry. I think I ate too much. My stomach, you know, its

been so long since...I don't think it can handle such-' 'Move Rosa ordered him. (214)

Generally what we expect is that man is the head of the family and he needs to manage financially and during the difficulties. Max leaves out home his widow mother alone. "If ever ...she held him one last time, by the elbows. "This could be your last hope.' He looked into her ageing face and kissed her, very hard, on the lips" (209). Max seems selfish because her mother raises him with difficulties. On the other hand the situation during the Holocaust was pathetic. He writes two stories for the Liesel *The Standover Man* and *The Word Shaker*. In *The Women Warrior Versus The Chinaman Pacific* writer King-Kok-Cheung insists that "Lest feminist criticism remain in the wilderness, White scholars must reckon with race and class as integral experiences for both man and women, and acknowledge that only female voices but the voices of many men of color have been historically silenced or dismissed"(183). Not only women men's voices are also unheard in the history. Some women are bolder than men. Max is also a victim of holocaust he has regret of leaving home "if only he'd turned for one last look at his family as he left the apartments. Perhaps then the guilt would have been so heavy. No final goodbye. No final grip of the eyes. Nothing but goneess"(209).

Ilsa Herman is a character who gives Liesel access to her library. She and Liesel had a good time together. But Liesel becomes very angry with Ilsa because Ilsa fires Rosa for her job as Ilsa's clothes washer. That is why Liesel returns the book of Ilsa. Ilsa seems always depressed because she loses her son in the Holocaust. In the conventional society women were always busy with household chores but we can see that Ilsa is a kind of women who has a library and gives all her clothes to wash. She is also a character from Zusak's novel who challenges the conventional patterns of

gender roles. “Perhaps it wasn’t the mayor’s library at all, it was hers. Ilsa Hermann’s” (491). Ilsa does not seem busy with any work at the home. This shows some of women during the war were educated. Ilsa encourages Liesel to study.

Just as she began to move again, she propped everything and asked, ‘This is your room, isn’t it?’

The mayor’s wife tightened. ‘I used to read here, with my son .but then...’

Liesel’s hand touched the air behind her. She saw a mother reading on the floor with a young boy pointing at the pictures and the words. Then she saw a war at the window. (491)

Because of the war Ilsa leaves to study. She has lots of memories in the library with her son. Holocaust has ruined Ilsa’s life.

Frau Holtzapfel is also a character of Zusak’s plot. She is a weird character in the novel because she spits every morning in the Hubermann door. “It was a tradition for Holtzapfel, one of the neighbours, to spit on the Hubermann’s door every time she walked past” (45). And she challenges the conventional because without getting married she has two sons and both were in army died. “She’d never married but had two sons” (45). It was unethical having babies before marriage but she proves herself as a strong women in front of the society. According to King-Kok Cheung in *The Woman Warrior Versus The Chinaman Pacific* she claims that “...The recent shift from feminist studies to gender studies suggests that the time has come to look at women and men together. I hope that the shift will also entice both men and women to do the looking and, by so doing, strengthen the alliance between gender studies and ethnic studies” (183). She suggests us to look male and female equally. No one is superior or inferior.

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* questions the conventional gender roles during the Holocaust. Characters of this novel challenge the conventional gender roles. Liesel and Rosa Hubermann perform their masculinity during the world war. On the other hand despite being a male he performs feminine characteristics. Here Butler's claim in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity* that:

Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes...the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence...Gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In his sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (33)

Gender performativity is related to the idea of gender identity in society. Gender identity is assigned to them by their own behavior and performance. No one is masculine and feminine by birth. Their identity is their performance.

Wrapping up the ideas, Zusak's *The Book Thief* explores the reversal of gender roles during the Holocaust. He conveys the message that gender is not stable, it changes according to the time and situation of the individual. Here also the central character of the novel a girl named Liesel is a strong, bold and brave, who lives with foster parents, she shows her masculine characteristics. She is forced to leave all her family members during the Holocaust. Her biological mother leaves home and her foster mother Rosa Hubermann earns money to run the family during the Holocaust. Similarly, Ilsa Hermann, Frau Diller, Frau Holtzapfel, sister Maria are the female characters of *The Book Thief*. But, they show masculine characteristics in the novel. By birth they are females and most of the women have babies too. Despite being

women also they perform their masculinity during the Holocaust. These female characters challenge the conventional gender roles during the Holocaust. In addition, males are always known as superior in the society as well as in the home. In traditional society women are always weaker and are known as care takers of the family members. But, during the Holocaust many males went outside to participate in the war. So, women get chance not only to look after the house but also to show their power in public arenas. Women prove that they are also equally capable as men.

Similarly, male characters of the novel show their feminine characteristics. Hans Hubermann, Liesel's foster father is a father of two children but in the entire novel he performs feminine characteristics. He nurtures Liesel like her mother. His wife Rosa earns money to run the family. Both children work in rich man's house to survive. Similarly, Max Vandenburg, a twenty three year old Jew leaves home and hides in Hans home. He seems selfish because he left his widow mother to save his life. Rosa scolds many times while eating the meal. That is why he was living with guilt. He seems frightening every time in the novel and gets nightmares every night.

So, Zusak successfully shows the reversal of conventional gender roles during the Holocaust in the novel. All the characters challenge traditional type of gender roles. So, gender is not natural and fix, it changes according to the situation. To save the life in difficulties all the characters of the novel change their behavior and characteristics. Holocaust is the main cause of reversal of conventional gender roles.

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