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# **“LAW UNDER SIEGE: A SOCIO-LEGAL REVIEW OF MARKUS ZUSAK’S THE BOOK THIEF”**

AUTHORED BY - AARYA ATUL JADHAV,  
B.A. LL.B. (3<sup>rd</sup> YEAR)

## **INTRODUCTION-**

“The Book Thief”, written by Markus Zusak, is an international bestseller published in 2005. It is a historical fiction novel set in Nazi Germany during 1939, depicting the struggles of humanity amidst the horrors of the Second World War.

The story revolves around a young girl named Liesel Merminger, who finds solace in stealing books and sharing them with others, to escape the harsh realities of war and destruction. Uniquely narrated from the perspective of "death" as a third person, this book describes Liesel's journey where the readers gain a deeper understanding of the importance of preserving humanity and the revolutionary power of literature.

While suitable for all types of readers, including -advocates, activists, educators, students and people interested in social justice, historical drama and other related fields.

The book is placed within the domain of World War II literature<sup>1</sup>, combining the fictional characters and narratives. The genre encompasses elements of drama, tragedy, fantasy, revolution and coming-of-age, thus addressing significant socio-legal issues.

## **CONTENT FROM SOCIO-LEGAL PERSPECTIVE-**

The novel consists of 88 chapters organized into ten parts along with a sensational prologue and an epilogue. Liesel Merminger is a nine-year old girl whose only family is her brother and mother. The story of her agony begins when she has to witness her mother being sent to a concentration camp and the unfateful death of her brother on their way to the foster homes. This is the time when she steals her first book- “A Gravedigger’s Handbook”.

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<sup>1</sup>The World War two literature examines the themes of race, power, democracy and the human conditions under such circumstances, addressing different issues with candor and realism.  
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/defense/energy-government-and-defense-magazines/literature-world-war-ii>

The novel is structured in such a way that it shows progression in Liesel's growing love for books with each part shedding light on various socio-legal issues under the Nazi Regime. The Prologue sets the tone with death introducing itself and its thoughts on humanity.

The First Part deals with the right to family and the impact of forced separation as Liesel is sent to the foster home. The second and third parts emphasize on the "right to education" where her foster father teaches her to read and she continues to steal more books, prohibited by the Nazis.

The fourth, fifth and sixth parts, describe Max Vandenburg, a Jewish man, hiding in the Hubermanns' basement, highlighting "the right to life" and "the persecution of minorities". On her way, she befriends Max as well as her neighbour, Rudy Steiner. She starts reading her books to her neighbours during the air raids in order to help them find peace in the chaos.

Part Seven and Eight describes her resistance the Nazi youth propaganda highlighting the "right to freedom of thought" and "freedom of expression" and "idea of human dignity", respectively. The final parts and the epilogue highlights the bombing of Molching underlining "the right to protection" from violence and the horrors of war and the aftermath of the war. Liesel's sensational fight and survival amidst the loss of her loved ones deals with the significance of the final enduring hope for human rights restoration.<sup>2</sup>

### ANALYSIS–

The book effectively uses its narrative structure and character development to penetrate One notable strength is the depiction of 'literature as a form of resistance' against the oppressive regimes. From my point of view, some of the most significant chapters include -"The Smell of Friendship" and "The Mayor's Library" where Liesel's love for stealing books begin.

The scenes in the chapter -"The Long Walk to Dachau" offer comfort and solidarity, highlighting the right to community and the role of literature in sustaining human dignity amidst crisis. The depiction of Max Vandenburg's plight in chapters like "The Swapping of Nightmares" and "The Hidden Sketchbook" is another strength, showcasing the importance of personal freedom under an oppressive regime. moral courage and resistance against systemic

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<sup>2</sup> Human Rights are the rights that every person has by virtue of being a human being. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has outlined 30 human rights.

<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights>

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-and-guidelines-right-remedy-and-reparation>

injustice.

The novel's narrative structure can be critiqued for its potential bias and pacing issues. The frequent shifts in perspective and slow pacing may disrupt the narrative flow, potentially diminishing the impact of the human rights issues presented. The use of 'Death' as a narrator provides a unique perspective but may introduce a level of detachment that could affect a reader's emotional engagement with the characters as they may not completely agree with the idea of something narrated by 'death' which is not a human character. However, after reading the entire novel, I think that Zusak's arguments about the power of literature and the moral complexities of resistance are well-supported. The depth of emotional and thematic exploration makes "The Book Thief" a profound read, though its narrative style and pacing may not appeal to everyone.

Despite these weaknesses, the novel's contribution to discussions on human rights and its emotional resonance make it a valuable and thought-provoking work as it not only questions the idea of totalitarianism, censorship, holocaust<sup>3</sup>, oppressive legal environment, moral courage, resistance against systemic injustice<sup>4</sup>, etc; also demonstrating optimism by highlighting 'human resilience' and 'the potential of literature', along with highlighting the significance— The Geneva Conventions (1949)<sup>5</sup>, The Hague Conventions (1899)<sup>6</sup>, The Rome Statute (1998)<sup>7</sup>, The United Nations Charter (1945)<sup>8</sup>, The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)(2013)<sup>9</sup>, etc.

Thus, the novel intertwines personal stories with broader socio-legal and human rights themes, providing a powerful narrative on resilience and the fight against oppression as love, friendship, brotherhood, power of literature and most importantly, humanity.

## EVALUATION-

Markus Zusak's "The Book Thief" offers a profound and accurate portrayal of life in Nazi Germany, witnessed through the eyes of a young girl, perceived by 'death'. It has a

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<sup>3</sup> Holocaust - <https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/pecl/article/download/1110/1087/3555>

<sup>4</sup> Systemic Justice - a community-driven approach to litigation that aims to transform the legal system to help marginalized communities achieve racial, social, and economic justice.

<sup>5</sup> The Geneva Conventions are a set of international treaties that establish rules for the treatment of the civilians and the soldiers.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hague-Conventions>

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rome\\_Statute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rome_Statute)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>

<sup>9</sup> <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/>

commendable depth and accuracy, providing an evocative evaluation of themes such as mortality, war, and the power of literature.

The book's relevance is significant for readers interested in historical fiction and World War II, presenting a compelling narrative that is both educational and emotionally engaging. As a modern classic, it will always be relevant in every generation.

The readability is high, with Zusak's distinctive writing style marked by a poetic and reflective tone, making the complex and often harrowing content accessible. The book is presented in a way that balances narrative depth with readability, making it easy to follow despite its rich and multifaceted storytelling.

In terms of value, the book is well-priced and offers considerable worth for its investment. Its format is attractive, and the price reflects the quality of the writing and the depth of the story. The structure is so well-thought and intricately designed that anyone will be in an awe after reading this. Every dialogue in the book provides a very emotional irony of the hardships of humanity in different socio-political realities like war and totalitarianism. It is a type of book which you can never forget.

Therefore, I strongly recommend "The Book Thief" not only for the readers of historical fiction, interested in the impact of war on individuals but also people who appreciate an elegant narrative.

The Book Thief is a satire and a didactic work of art communicating the strong emotions portrayed by the characters, which stay alive within the minds of readers. It truly does justice to make people realize who they are and what inherent rights they possess. Thus, I pledge to all the past and future readers of this book- Let us all stand united for the victory of brotherhood, love, friendship, inclusion, empathy, sensitivity, justice, equality of our fellow humans, as rightly said by the author-

“SOMETIMES PEOPLE ARE BEAUTIFUL.  
NOT IN LOOKS. NOT IN WHAT THEY SAY.  
JUST IN WHAT THEY ARE.”

-MARKUS ZUSAK