

FROM FENCE TO FRIENDSHIP (THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS BY JOHN BOYNE)

Dr. Madhavi Moharil Associate Professor, Department of English Rajkumar Kewalramani Kanya Mahavidyalaya Nagpur

Abstract

The chapter of World War II has a significant bold mention in the history of the world. Holocaust and concentration camps in Germany are considered to be the significant episodes at that time. Many writers have described the predicaments of the victims of that era. John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is one of such works that portrays the story of a nine-year old boy on the backdrop of the horrors of extermination camps. His discovery of a new friend of the same age, wearing the striped pyjamas compel the readers to grieve over the sad realities of the world history. The paper is an attempt to critically analyse the work of Boyne in the context of holocaust.

Keywords-

holocaust, concentration camp, Auschwitz, experiences

The Holocaust and World War II has a significant and bold mention in the history of the world due to the unprecedented brutal killing of civilians with no crime of their own. It was a genocidal war that snatched life from 6 million Jews, 200000 Gypsies, 1 million Polish civilians and 70000 Germans who were considered as physically, mentally inferior to the prosperity of Germany. These records of crushing of humanity under the guise of pseudo nationalism made many to contemplate over the cause of human existence on Earth. Through the concentration camps and gas chambers the right to live was denied to many innocents. Writers have penned down the trauma and horror of the holocaust effectively and truthfully exhibited the pain and sufferings of the victims of Semitism. The fiction, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a tale of concentration camp which was told and experienced by innocent boy of ten, Bruno. It is through the innocent gaze of a child who naively embraces death for no fault of his own. John Boyne in an interview when he was asked, 'What do you mean by, 'Fences such as the one at the heart of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* still exist; it is unlikely that they will ever fully disappear', responses with the words,

The Holocaust is the greatest example of man's inhumanity to man. Of irrational hatreds based on people's religion, sexuality, the colour of their skin of horrendous violence. The fences that divide the adults in the novel, their simple faith and belief in the rationality of these hatreds, continue to exist around the world today. (Vintage Classics Last pages of *The Boy Striped Pyjamas*)

John Boyne, an Irish novelist of 14 novels for adults and younger readers is marked as one of the most successful and admired novelists of his generation. The most popular novel of Boyne is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* which has been adapted for cinema, theatre, ballet and opera also due to the realistic presentation of a historical episode of the holocaust in Germany during World War II. The novel is written from the omniscient point of view exhibiting the innocent gaze of Bruno, a German boy of nine. He has great awe for his father, the commander of the concentration camp at Auschwitz, Out-With. The survivors of holocaust have reported that Auschwitz was the greatest Nazi concentration camp built by the Germans during the Second World War. Its function was to imprison and exterminate people from across Europe in the Nazi programme of cultural and ethnic cleaning. The novel is revealed from the perspective of the innocent boys Bruno and Shmuel who are not different by birthdays or age but were being segregated through the fencing line between the Jews and Germans. Bruno's new house at the concentration camp is described as, 'The new house however stood all on its own in an empty, desolate place and there were no other houses anywhere to be seen which meant there would be no other families around and no other boys to play with, neither friends nor troubles.' (12) Through the window of the new house, Bruno and Gretel, his sister, watch the huge, very high wire fence that run along the length and height of the house. It is the picture of desolate and strangely

sombre land. Gretel astonishes, 'who would build such a nasty looking place?(34) Bruno and Gretel see hundreds of people and so many huts nearby. The camp is spread out so farther than they could possibly see. That is looked as though there must be thousands of there (38). Bruno and Gretel observes people wearing the same clothes as each other: a pair of grey striped pyjamas with grey striped cap on their head. Boys, adults, young old all are seen in the same type of set of clothes. Through the curious observation of the children, John Boyne depicts the gravity of the situation.

After the World War I, Hitler rose to power in Germany. The crisis in economy, polity and society formed the background to Hitler's rise to authority. The German's defeat horrified him and the Versailles Treaty made him furious. His party came to be known as the Nazi Party. Hitler was a powerful speaker. His passion and his words moved the people. The Nazi argument was simple: the strongest race would survive and the weak ones would perish. They considered the pure German race to be strong and suitable to dominate the world. Hitler believed,

'For this earth is not allotted to anyone nor is it presented to anyone as a gift. It is awarded by providence to people who in their hearts have the courage to conquer it, the strength to preserve it, and the industry to put it to the plough... the primary right of this world is the right to life, so far as one possesses the strength for this. Hence, on the basis of this right a vigorous nation will always find ways of adapting its territory to its population size.' (Sutar61)

This belief of Hitler resulted in the seizing of Jews in the extermination camps. Among the concentration camps, many prisoners were going through meaningless existence. Boyne has projected the feeling of insecurity, fear, and hopelessness through the innocent gaze of Shmuel, a Jew boy suffering in a concentration camp. Bruno is told on countless occasions by his parents that he is not allowed to walk in the direction of the fence or the camp. Despite the repeated warnings, in an attempt to be like Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, he wanders. During one of such, Bruno's explorations to the nearby barren places he happens to meet a Jewish boy of his age, Shmuel, who was wandering near the massive fence. The boundary is the symbol of the difference between the Germans and the Jews, then the social conditions of parting them from each other. They secretly meet nearly every day and talking with each other develops a strong bond of innocent friendship. Curious Bruno gathers many pieces of information from Shmuel regarding the world of the other side of the fence. Bruno observes the difference between the uniform and striped pyjama with words that speak volumes. It is depicted as,

Of course sometimes the two groups mixed. He'd often seen the people from his side of the fence on the other side of the fence and when he watched it was clear that they were in charge. The pyjama people all jumped to attention whenever the soldiers approached and sometimes they fell to the ground and sometimes they didn't even get up and had to be carried away instead. (104)

The words, 'the pyjama people jumped to attention' and 'sometimes they fell to the ground and sometimes they didn't even get up and had to be carried away instead' present the picture of brutality in the extermination camp.

In the concentration camps, along with men, women, senior citizens, children were also dumped. Curious explorations of Bruno to the far distant land from the new house result in the meeting with Shmuel. Bruno's observation of Shmuel, depicts the distress of the boy with his posture. Bruno finds, 'The boy was smaller than Bruno and was sitting on the ground with a forlorn expression. He wore the same striped pyjamas that all the other people on that side of the fence wore, and a striped cloth cap on his head. He wasn't wearing any shoes or socks and his feet were rather dirty. On his arm he wore an armband with a star on it.' (109) Bruno sees, 'an enormous pair of sad eyes staring back' (110). Bruno has never seen a skinnier sadder boy in his life and opens up a conversation with him. Both feel that their names are strange but attractive. To Bruno, the name of Shmuel sounds like the wind blowing and Shmuel feels Bruno's name sounding like 'someone who's rubbing their arms to keep warm'. It is an innocent affectionate, curious bond of candid relationship that starts growing between the boys belonging to two completely contradictory social set up during the Nazi regime. Boyne's impactful deliberate depiction of the boys sharing the same age and same birthdays unfortunately lead towards different fortunes brings out the then condition of the children in Germany as Germans and Jews.

Children like twins, having birth in the same year, same day live pathetically contrast background and conditions clearly disclose the predicaments of the German and Jew children and families.

In the company of Bruno, Shmuel unveils many major, and minor things in the ghetto he lives in. Shmuel comes to the fence as the boys on his side of the fence fight a lot and Bruno's loneliness brings him to the fence to get someone to speak to. Shmuel's descriptions of the regular fights among the boys make the readers guess easily that the fights must be for a piece of bread. His preference to be aloof from the quarrelsome companies can be the result of the same.

Boyne has penned down the sufferings of Jews. Old Pavel, a successful practicing doctor is presented working as a waiter and is treated insolently by the young German soldier, Kotler who is in the army of the Fury, Hitler. In fact, Kotler is young enough to be Pavel's grandson. He shouts at the old Jew Pavel with rude words, 'make sure, you wash your hands before touching any of the food, you filthy.' (78) During the Nazi rule in Germany, some people empathized with the victims. Bruno's grandmother is very close to her grandchildren but she despises her son's work and proclaims her disappointment for his political involvement in the Nazi regime. She remains unimpressed after his placement as a commander in Hitler's army. Her reactions exhibit that Bruno's father ascend as a Nazi commander was a huge disappointment for her. She expresses, 'I wonder- is this where I went wrong with you, Ralf? I wonder if all the performances I made you give as a boy led you to this. Dressing like a puppet on a string?' (94) She feels ashamed of her son to be the part of Nazi's brutality behind the façade of nationalism. Kotler's father, a young man of forty, a professor of literature who leaves his country in 1938, before the Second World War and preferred to settle in Switzerland. The reason might be the disagreement with the government policy. Bruno's father calls such people as 'traitors' and 'cowards'. He feels that such young Germans have left Germany at 'the moment of the greatest glory and the most vital need' (151). Many remained silent over the atrocities committed at Auschwitz Concentration Camps. Pastor Niemoeller, writes movingly about the silence of others and registers his disappointment for the absence of protest with the words,

First they came for the Communists,

Well, I was not a Communist-

So I said nothing.

Then they came for the Social Democrats,

Well, I was not a Social Democrat

So I did nothing,

Then they came for the trade Unionists,

But I was not a trade unionist.

And then they came for the Jews,

But I was not a Jew- so I did little.

Then when they came for me,

There was no one left who could stand up for me.'

Victor Frankle's, *Man's Search for Meaning* is another significant book that casts Nazi network of concentration camps. The book brings out the terrible experiences of holocaust survivors. While describing the camp life, he writes,

'I would like to mention a few similar surprises on how much we could endure: we were unable to clean our teeth and yet in spite of that and a severe vitamin deficiency we had healthier gums than ever before. We had to wear the same shirts for half a year until they had lost all appearance of being shirts. For days we were unable to wash, even partially because of frozen water pipes and yet the sores and abrasions on hands which were dirty from work in soil did not separate.' (Frankle,30)

During that period, Hitler was greatly interested in the youths of the country. He believed that a strong nation could be built only by imbibing Nazi ideology in the minds of youngsters. It required control over the child both inside and outside. The novel projects the characters like Bruno's teacher Herr Liszt expecting Bruno to know the history of who he is, where he comes from, his family heritage and the fatherland. (101) Nineteen years young Nazi soldier, Kurt Kotler's body language, sternness, reactions, approach towards Jews are seen to be the results of deliberate teachings of the young

generation. Bruno's father, the commanding officer in the Nazi party is also proud of Germany's culture and follows the duty towards his 'Fatherland' with great commitment. Brutal face of the lieutenant is exposed with his treatment given to Shmuel in Bruno's house

In the backdrop of brutal skirmishes in the outside world, John Boyne portrays the canvas of his plot with hues of innocent friendship between the boys who were ignorant of political standpoints. The violence in the atmosphere and rampant inhumanity outside, gradually gets overshadowed by the earnest, curious but innocent understandings among the children and their perspectives. The pieces of conversation between the friends strengthen the bond of empathy. Bruno is anxious to crawl through and join Shmuel for play. He starts liking the barren place just because of Shmuel's secret companies and talks. Bruno's shaving of the head was getting affected by the lice, alike the appearance of Bruno and Shmuel, sincere attempt to search Shmuel's missing father, and their innocent affection for each other gradually enhance the engagement of the readers in the plot of the novel. 'One final adventure' of Bruno with Shmuel to the other side of the fence changes the entire picture. Shmuel's act of bringing the striped pyjamas for Bruno seems to indicate an attempt to wipe out the boundaries between the sides. Skinny Shmuel and cheeky Bruno exhibit the otherwise similarity of the lives of the boys would not be affected by the then brutal surroundings. The rights of children must be preserved everywhere. Unfortunately, the available data indicates that the unprecedented holocaust missed out the basic rights of humanity. Bruno's memory of his grandmother telling him, 'you wear the right outfit and you feel like the person you are pretending to be', and Bruno's assumption, 'I suppose to that what I am doing, pretending to be a person from the other side of the fence' (212) compel the readers to ponder over the content between the lines.

Crossing the fence with a desire to hug Shmuel just to let him know how much Bruno likes him and how much he has enjoyed talking to him over the last year demolishes the man-made boundaries in the world of children. From the hypothetical world of the outside, Bruno falls into the world of disillusionment when he experiences the ghettos looking terribly sad, skinny with sunken eyes and a lice outbreak. They are tamed and instructed by the laughing, and shouting of the soldiers with guns. Bruno's reaction, 'I think I ought to go home' (215) presents fear in his mind to see the naked, cruel reality. The day and moment prove fatal to Bruno and Shmuel too. German and Jews simultaneously and with the same intensity. Ten soldiers surround the area blowing whistles. Hundreds of people in striped pyjamas including Bruno and Shmuel march slowly towards a long room. Bruno's curious exploration leads him to the dark gas chamber in the company of a Jewish boy of his age. Bruno's life ends with holding the hand of Shmuel with the hope that someday they will meet again in Berlin in a liberal and fearless atmosphere.

Though the book caught the attention of many readers and critics for its accessible and effective manner of communication, it received high criticism too. Hannah Randall, expresses her disagreement with the conclusion of the story when she writes,

The story's conclusion leaves many readers upset. Bruno digs a tunnel under the wire, crawls into the camp then he and Shmuel go looking for Shmuel's missing father. Both boys are swept up in a group of prisoners being taken to the gas chamber, where all of them are murdered. The emotional focus of the story is on Bruno's family and their distress as they realise what has happened to their son. The reader's attention remains with the experience of the concentration camp commandant and his wife whose son has been killed in what is portrayed as a tragic accident (Hannah).

To conclude, the Holocaust is marked with brutality on the dark pages of world history. The era witnessed inhumane cruelty. John Boyne's depiction of the horror through the innocent eyes of two children concludes with an unexpected climax makes the readers shudder with awe and fear. The story ends on the note of anticipation where the two friends can meet and enjoy fearlessness and a vibrant life. The fiction makes the readers question at last, whether brutality be justified to such an extent. The back story and an interview with the author unveil the writer's perspective concerning the presentation of the characters and setting of the novel. It marks its sombre impact on the minds of the readers and compels them to grieve over the sad realities of world history.

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