

Vigilance and Violence: A Modern Holocaust Rendition of Hansel and Gretel

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Research and literature have augmented its principles to campaign for disparate contemporary global issues. Constituted under the umbrella term of the societal conflicts, the refugee crisis has acutely evolved and matured in the postmodern era. Ensuing the aftermath of the enormous historical occurrences such as the two World Wars, industrialisation and cold ethnic genocides, the world witnessed assorted mass forced migrations. This research paper aims to disclose the systematic oppression of Jews through chronic surveillance and the catastrophic refugee life with reference to *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: A Novel of War and Survival* by Louis Murphy. Adapting an acclaimed fairy tale into a refugee narrative, the author has effectively offered a vivid portrait of the Holocaust. The study substantiates the analogies and disparities between the past and current version, further detailing the constant scrutiny, male gaze and the horror of genocide employing the theories of gaze by Jeremy Hawthorn in the chosen fiction.

Keywords: fairy tale, gaze, Holocaust, Jewish refugees, surveillance.

From signs to scripts, the evolution of literature from antiquity to nouvelle has paralleled itself with the advancements of society. Tracing numerous crucial episodes of history as well as exploring the realm of fantasy, literary works plays a pivotal role in imaging the world and beyond. Literature has been an element of people's life

ever since its emergence such as its presence in court, stage, coffee houses and the like. People harvested collective historical, social, moral and scientific facts befalling across them through words and reacted by advocating their rights. One of its branches is fairy tale and its origin is customarily trailed back to the oral tradition which was the only source of literature prior to the emanation of writing culture which can be understood through the following lines.

Until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fairy tales were -as they still are in remote primitive centers of civilization -told to adults as well as to children. In Europe they used to be the chief form of wintertime entertainment. In agricultural populations, telling fairy tales became a kind of essential, spiritual occupation. (Franz, 1996, p. 04)

The poetic form of fairy tales emerged only in the eighteenth century with the use of symbols and motifs. Until this time, the religious scriptures were the main source of moral education. The fantasy which was lacking in the scriptures paved the way for the development of fairy tales in the following centuries with the emergence of the Grimms. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm are considered to be masters of collecting fairytales from various lands and compiling them. Initially, the brothers literally wrote the stories as they heard but in later years they edited and enhanced the stories to suit the needs of the age. Subsequently, it has been mutated and materialised as nursery rhymes, literature and movies at the moment.

Rhymes were inspired originally from lullabies and local legends or fairy tales. A number of literary works have reference to fairy tales such as witches and witchcrafts in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Gail Carson Levine's (1997) *Ella Enchanted* as a retelling of Cinderella's story, Jane Yolen's (2011) *Snow in Summer* as a retelling of Snow White and the like. Copious numbers of movies have been adapted from the fairytales. For instance, Disney adapted almost all the popular stories across the globe into movies such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Tangled*, *The Beauty and the Beast*, *The Princess and the Frog*, etc. Thus, manuscripts which were once unobtainable by countless commoners became accessible with thriving

technologies. The book chosen for study, *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* by Louis Murphy is also a literary adaptation as a refugee and genocide narration from Brother Grimms' fairytale collection.

The demography of the globe has been tremendously altered due to the surging movement of people across boundaries. Wars end, soldiers retreat, bombs are disassembled, but the prolonged chain reaction that annexes it, dwells. In association with this, one such consequence of the war is the ensuing trauma of being refugees in an alien land. Refugees around the world have been displaced prominently following ethnic cleansing. Ethnic cleansing is the orchestrated killing of a particular ethnic group plotted by dominant figures in order to form an organically pure community. Ethno-centrism is the core of these kinds of systematic persecution. From being an integrated family with a serene ambience and security, refugees are forced to displace and become no land's people for survival. International political bodies have constructed distinct frameworks for the protection of the homeless, yet innumerable masses lose the battle of life in transit. Refugee literature bestowed the plank to address the trauma of dislocation in varied genres.

Refugees didn't just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they'd put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day. (Hashimi, 2015, p. 258)

Twentieth century marked the gradual and steady growth of refugee studies. The publications of Michael Marrus (1985) titled *Unwanted* and Wolfgang Jocabmeyer (1985) entitled *Displaced Persons* spiked the emphasis of refugee and ethnic studies. Literature on the other hand, united with this significant field and composed refugee narratives in totality. World wars paved ample scope for compositions of this kind with a considerable number of displaced persons either sharing their experiences or fictions being built upon happenings. Persecution of Jews can be traced throughout world history right from the Exodus to the current Palestinian dispute. Nazi regime's oppression and genocidal attitude towards the Jews and their shift to elude became a prominent theme lately.

Annexing to the context of refugees due to ethnic cleansing, this research paper will elaborate the essence of adaptation of a fairytale into a Holocaust displacement narrative in *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: A Novel of War and Survival* by Louis Murphy. Further, by the application of the *Theories of Gaze* by Jeremy Hawthorn, it will examine the visual control the Nazis had over the Jews which held them as hostages within their homeland as citizens and in foreign land as refugees.

Literature Review

Both as a reworking of a fairytale and a Refugee narrative, this work has been critically studied by few scholars in varied critical perspectives. Jamid Khader (2011) ponders over the concept of vampirism and related motifs in the text to exemplify the remorseless evil psyche of the Nazis in his article named “Humanizing the Nazi?: The Semiotics of Vampirisms, Trauma and Post-Holocaust Ethics in Louis Murphy’s *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: A Novel of War and Survival?*”. Holocaust narratives consistently possess themes of trauma and memory. Abiding by this, Dilek Tufekci Can, Serhat Guzel and Seyda Savran (2014), in their work entitled “*The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: Through the Lens of New Historicism*” provides a historic view of the genocide with the blend of dark reminiscence, trauma and identity crisis. Psychological view becomes an essential component with context to the Jewish refugee studies as the victims endure both mental and physical shifts. Evi Nora Demanik (2016), in her article named “Children Mental Disorder through the Nazi Invasion Portrayed in Louis Murphy’s novel *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* investigates the work and demonstrates the Dissociative Amnesia, Depression, Panic and the impact of the mass extermination in children with reference to Hansel and Gretel in the novel. Considerable critical probes have been made exclusively on the fairy tale. In the same metal, Ulrich C Kneopflmacher (2005) published an article entitled, “The Hansel and Gretel Syndrome: Survivorship Fantasies and Parental Desertion” deals exclusively with the fairy tale and elaborates how the children survive despite being abandoned by their parents. The comprehensive literature review aided in identifying the research gap and provides a scope to view the

dominating characters' visual oppression over the Jews and its representation influenced by the fairytale.

Fairy-tale and the Scary tale

The Final Solution to the Jewish Question was the destruction of almost 60% of the Jewish population and the rest ending up as refugees. The friction in the relationship between certain Jewish communities and early Christian leaders can be traced to the first century. This adversarial situation bloomed out of various cultural stereotypes and political motives over the years. One such reason is the negligence of a particular group of people to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah leading to the portrayal of the former as religious outlaws. This aversion towards Jews widened as they were considered mere sub-humans and became the supreme target for accusations. The situation grew worse due to frequent attacks of temple and religious beliefs. In the 1930s, this animosity took a demonic shape with the rule of Adolf Hitler.

The emotional and ideological priority of Hitler's anti-semitism and the wider understanding of history as racial struggle in which it was embedded were shared by much of the Nazi leadership and party. (Browning, 2004, p. 10)

Initially, Nazi regime passed a law entitled "Law for Restoration of Professional Civil Service" which discarded servants who were considered politically unfit. This law was further refined to exclude people who belonged to Non-Aryan bloodline. This resulted in hundreds of vacancies in different fields of profession which economically upheld the status of other sects while Jews were pushed into borderline poverty. The mass manipulation displayed the business owning Jews as threats to other small scale business owners and elites in Germany. All the shops run by Jews were marked with antisemitic symbols and this made the Germans of other sects to resist themselves from shopping there. This distanced the former from the economically stable society and increased the profit of the latter in the field of business.

Adding to the existing stereotypes and antisemitism, political propaganda played a crucial role in inducing hatred against Jews.

Hitler's election campaigns and manifestos were built upon the foundation of forming an organic race which evidently was an act of political opportunism. All his public speeches were overflowing with patriotism and antisemitism in which he bagged millions of votes by villainising the Jews and victimising the rest. The defeat in World War I was also attributed as the betrayal by Jews. Following the failure, in the years from 1912 to 1929 which are considered as the Nazi's era of downfall, antisemitism became the core obsession to gain support and trust of the multitudes. Execution of the murderous plan in Germany later escalated to other parts of Europe such as Poland. Further expansion of German territory into Poland in 1939 involved the fall of around two million Jews in the border. Post expansion, the Jews were considered as potential enemies in Poland and even in other nations around Germany.

Eventually, Jews became the prime target and they were discriminated against because the past three generations of their family were Jewish. Abiding by the law, they were eliminated from theatre, particular jobs, political life and were subjected to social inequity. Nazi's constant search for a final solution to the Jewish question was just a veil as the answer was already conspicuous. Anti-semitic attitudes were instilled with irrational hatred which began with trivial laws and accelerated to massacre with Adolf Hitler as the leading conspirator. Ghettos and concentration camps served as the slaughterhouses of Jews. Profuse methods were used to deprive the existence of Jews and the genocidal process was initiated with the old aged, disabled, mentally ill and queers to form a gene without deformity.

Later, the Nazis extended the mass murder mission to exterminate the whole Jewish population. Gas Chamber Tragedy remains as one of the vicious methods used by Nazis to annihilate whom they considered to be the ones not worth living. Shower rooms and gas rooms were loaded with pipes filled with carbon monoxide which they released once the victims were stranded inside and were left to die by suffocation. To evade this Holocaust, millions of Jews became refugees principally in the United States of America and scattered to alternative geographical areas. The wrecked plight of Jews is briefly stated by Michael Mann (2005) in his book titled *The*

Dark Side of Democracy as “Jews and gypsies would constitute a fourth *pariah nation* type: minorities without a homeland state”. (p. 68)

Since the selected fiction, *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: A Novel of War and Survival* by Louis Murphy is an adaptation of the original fairy tale from Brothers Grimm compilation, there are numerous identifiable similarities and differences between both the works. Brothers Grimm’ folklore and fairy tales, deriving their origin from German mythology and oral literature, became an inevitable element in Children’s literature. “Hansel and Gretel” is a predominant and a notable story among their works entitled *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* translated and edited by Jack Zipes (2014). It is a story of a brother and a sister being abandoned by their stepmother and father due to peaking famine, finding shelter in a witch’s hut who tries to kill them. In this attempt, the witch feeds the brother so that she could be profited with more meat. Conclusively, the children wittily plot and push the witch into the oven and return with her jewels just to become rich and find that their stepmother had died.

Parallel to this story, the fiction chosen for the study is a story of two Jewish children who leave their home to survive, taking up the names Hansel and Gretel. Fortunately, in the modern version, they end up at a good witch’s hut that saves them from being killed. The witch gets them fake proof and protects them at all costs but loses her life in this attempt. The children too, find their father at a refugee camp after a long run and get saved. They had to leave their home as the Nazis were nearing them and find refuge in a secured space unlike the original version. Elements of the former tale have been either altered or adapted as it is which will be listed in this chapter. Throughout the fiction, such hardships faced by Germans and refugees are shown via the fairy tale plot. For instance, the escape of their father shown through the lines below:

He fled from western Poland not in an airplane, defying the old laws of gravity, but crawling along in a peasant’s cart pulled by a spavined horse bought with all the silver spoons his wife owned. (Murphy, 2003, p. 2)

True to the word adaptation, the contemporary version has taken multiple interpretations from the past such as the witch, witch's hut covered with bread, children's name, hot oven inside the house, dense forest, stepmother and the like. The witch, named Magda is portrayed as a good human who tries to save the children from the Nazis which shall be evidently seen in the work through following instances. She feeds the children well so that they are not killed for being weak, colours their hair, gets fake identity proofs and knits a story of their origin stating that they belong to a clan of Christianity and the predominant feature that has been adapted is the concept of oven. The oven here serves as a safety hub to hide when the soldiers neared their hut and on the other hand, Magda is sent to the gas chamber and her mortal remains were blazed in a hot oven which is represented in the text as, "Magda's ashes were raked out and mingled with the ashes of hundreds of others" (Murphy, 2003, p.242).

Hansel and Gretel were directed to the deep forest by the cruel stepmother to save food for her and her spouse due to outraging war in the antique edition. Contrarily, the stepmother, another inspiration from the Grimms' tale is also an optimistic figure as she changes their name and warns Hansel to hide his circumcised privates so that they remain unidentified as Jews. Appearing as the most transformed character, she asks the children to disappear and save their lives. Further, when she becomes aware that her step daughter was raped, she murders the rapists but loses her life in this attempt which is very inverse to the existing version. The children too, recall every instruction given by her and try to find a farmer who could serve them throughout their life. The motif of forest in both the works have varied motives behind. In the old tale, the forest represents evil and a dangerous place to survive whereas in the latter text, the forest becomes the safest haven for the children to hide and protect themselves.

Surveillance

Jeremy Hawthorn (2006) in his critical work, *Theories of Gaze*, puts forth countable perspectives and aspects of gaze. This work is one among the essays of Patricia Waugh's (2006) compilation of critical essays entitled *Literary Theory and Criticism*. He

differentiates gaze from looking. Looking according to the author is a “cumulative process” as it is not just for collecting data but it has other uses to pierce into the social and cultural motives behind. To advocate his point, he draws content from a former term, point of view. This term is highly akin to narratology, as an author while penning a text employs a particular character’s point of view to emphasise his/her thoughts. There are diversified notions about this theory beginning from John Berger’s (1972) book *Ways of Seeing* which holds the fundamentals of this concept. Consequently, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* by Sigmund Freud (1905) brings to the limelight, a term “scopophilia” which in detail is the act of controlling through gaze and making something as an object.

Gaze is utilised as a discourse which is precisely depicted in the text as “a means to encourage a particular way of considering a text or an utterance, and relating it to broader socio-historical and ideological matters” (Waugh 2006, p. 509). Earlier, this theory was applied to movies to analyse the characters’ gaze which later emerged into the literary field. To aid this, he demonstrates the gazes of characters in the movie named *Rear Window* by Alfred Hitchcock (1954). Michel Foucault’s (1977) work *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* became a renowned work for its concept of ‘Panopticism’. Panopticon is a structural term used to explain the circular shape of a prison and the tower mounted in the middle to watch the prisoners. They considered it to be a punishment which prompts discipline among the inmates, thus reducing the crimes.

Correspondingly, the Nazis’ primary step in the search of Final Solution was to assort Jews from the rest of the German population. They underwent intense surveys and prepared systematic methods to pick them. They collected the data of Jews through Census, schools, workplace and hospitals. The Jews were under constant surveillance after the emergence of Hitler’s Reich which is similar to the concept of panopticon. Jews were considered as equivalent to prisoners and they were watched throughout by the Nazi officers. In the novel too, the characters are under scrutiny by the officials which can be witnessed through the lines from the text such as “If I walk many more hours with no food, I die. If they catch me, I die. If they don’t

catch me, I die. If I go back with no motorcycle, I die. If I steal a motorcycle from the German, I die". (Murphy, 2003, p. 46)

The SS officers (Schutzstaffel) were the corps assigned for surveillance and they visited every village to ensure the absence of Jews and executed Hitler's orders. To evade this, Magda creates the children's fake identity proofs and frames a morphed photo of them being christened with the assistance of a priest. She disguised them as Polish born in all ways possible. Hunger was haunting people as they were provided only with a limited ration so that they never shelter a Jew in their home. The officials often inspected the village in order to find whether a Jew is being safeguarded. Basha and Andrzej, a couple, were killed in the heart of the village for keeping their infant's death in secrecy and getting its ration. Children with efficient health were marked and taken away by the Nazis so the parents intentionally harmed their children. In an instance, Magda and Telek intend to mutilate Gretel's leg in order to protect her but their love hindered their intention. Towards the end of the novel, the SS officers near the hut immediately after dawn after receiving a report about Magda's help to the Jewish children.

To dodge them, the good witch shields by hiding them inside the oven at her hut and orders them to stay inside until she returns. The officers raid the whole hut and find nothing, yet take Magda with them out of suspicion, never to be seen again. Magda's niece, Nelka and her husband, Telek, escape their village to save themselves and their infant and become refugees. Surveillance becomes a torture in this context as the people, especially Jews were watched by the officials similar to eagles and owls. Refugees in any country are patrolled for civil security but Jews became refugees even within their country. Here panopticism is a punishment but for the innocents.

The Male Gaze

The concept of women being subjected as an object is a primary discussion in the chosen theoretical work. Male gaze is the visual dominance of men over women which is exquisitely displayed as "Men act and women appear" (Berger, 1972, p.47). This kind of gaze often leads to violence when prolonged. In Margaret Atwood's

(1972) novel, *Surfacing*, husband records his wife being exposed stating that the video is for a movie and she abides to him. This is a concept akin to feminism as it voices the cause of women liberation. Discussing about male gaze, it becomes essential to note the sexual abuse and associated crimes committed against Refugee women and women in common. Men with higher authority tend to exploit women with less voice in the text. The fiction, even though being an adaptation of a fairytale, never fails to point out the societal injustices.

The stepmother, in the fear of Gretel being abused, orders them to rush into the forest to hide from the officers which can be evidently seen through her words: “The girl is eleven, old enough to be useful. They may have luck” (Murphy 2003, p. 3). Apart from the terror of being hunted by the Nazis, the fear of abuse is prominent in this context. Hungry, homeless and most of all being women among the Nazi troops, the turmoil the characters go through show it is harder to be both a woman and a Jew. After much consideration and protection, the stepmother too lives in an abusive ambience amidst the forest. In many instances, the male rebels in the text consider offering the stepmother as a slave to the soldiers if they get caught. This shows how women are objectified as a commodity for saving the life of the male comrades.

Gretel, protected and loved by Magda and her family, was often stared at by a Nazi officer and every time Magda comes to rescue her by distracting the officer. There was a constant anxiety within the witch to protect the girl’s chastity. Despite all the efforts made by them, the girl faces her elders’ terror one day. During her walk in the woods, two strangers abduct and physically exploit her while she is unconscious. Gretel loses her memory and turns into a child due to this trauma. Here too, men view her as an object that ought to be oppressed just because there shall be no legal reactions. With extreme rage, the stepmother kills the rapists but dies getting a bullet. In the fairy tale, the stepmother dies out of illness after abandonment of the children, contrarily, here, she dies avenging her daughter’s wrongdoers. The trauma follows her till the end of the fiction which shows the intensity of the physical and mental agony.

Male gaze does not just confine to objectification and sexual exploitation. It rather extends to superstition as well. Nelka is taken to officer Oberfuhrer's office and without a concern of her having an infant, the sister connects needles between both of them to transfer blood from Nelka to the officer to refine his blood. The officer intentionally chose Nelka for this process rather than a male. Here he gazes at women as an object once again and uses her as a purifying agent rather than a living being. Such a gaze seems inhumane and she escapes to become a refugee in a foreign land rather than die after extraction of every drop of blood from her body. The demonic officer plotted this by seizing Nelka's baby and forcing her for transfusion. The male gaze, not just on Jews but collectively on women in the text depict the visual control of men over women. Yet, in this fiction, all the crucial roles are women and men play a rather evil or supportive role.

Conclusion

Far from being Jews and Refugees, the characters had to be under supervision and any minor suspicion would eventually lead to death. Carnage of Jews remains as one of the cruellest persecutions on earth. Systematic oppression with frequent vigilance and lack of basic rights, livelihood and privacy seemed minimal in comparison with the gas chamber. At one point, after the constant canvas of Nazis, the German non-Jews believed that Jews were truly evil and those who are not worth living. This led to xenophobic antisemitism and Jews were watched by the multitudes. "Already in the midst of committing mass murder against millions of Jews and non-Jews on Soviet territory, "ordinary" Germans would not shrink from implementing Hitler's Final Solution for the Jews of Europe as well" (Browning 2004, p. 433). Jews had none to rely on during the time of crisis due to the fear of this collective hatred. The chimeric attitude of the Nazis to form pure bloodstock which they believed to be superior, wiped a vast number of lives from earth.

The vigilant nature of the Nazis was prolonged and was a never-ending threat to the Jews. Even after displacement, the children never survived in peace. Once Magda is taken, the children begin the search for their father and conclusively find him at a refugee camp in

their town. The author has given a vivid image of the overwhelming emotions of the reunion as “The man sobbed and he held the boy out so he could look into his face. He ran his fingers over the poor, dyed hair and the pale skin” (Murphy 2003, p. 283). On the way, they were still watched and were under danger hiding in farms and bushes with Gretel’s mental illness and Hansel’s bravery. Crossing borders to evade did not affect the Nazis as they were spreading their murderous mission across Europe and scrutinising the outspread of Jews in other geographic regions through intense security. Louis Murphy has brilliantly adapted a fairy tale and converted it into a traumatic Holocaust narrative yetaining the essence of the old version.

Awareness about the Holocaust and the Refugees should be carried forward to the looming generations. Through the antagonists in the novel, the author attempts to feature how humans can be vile and brutal towards their fellow beings. Democracy becomes just a word if there are no traces of liberty in the society. Hitler is chosen as the ruler through democratic voting method yet contradictorily he disempowers the sense of democracy. Jews were not just kept under visual control inside Germany, they were deprived of privacy and basic rights after becoming Refugees in other countries too. The chosen fiction endorses love as the ultimate goal of life which becomes apparent through the affection of Magda, stepmother and Nelka who had put their lives in jeopardy:

There is much to love, and the love is what we are left with. When the bombs stop dropping, and the camps fall back to the earth and decay, and we are done killing each other, that is what we must hold. We can never let the world take our memories of love away, and if there are no memories, we must invent love all over again. (Murphy 2003, p. 285)

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