



# RESISTING THE BIOPOLITICAL OPERATION OF NAZI REGIME IN THE *BOOK THIEF*

<sup>1</sup>N. Jessie (Reg. No: 21211274012016)

Ph.D Research Scholar,

PG and Research Department of English

St. John's College

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,  
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu)

<sup>2</sup>Dr. A. Rathina Prabhu,

Assistant Professor

Ph.D Research Scholar,

PG and Research Department of English

St. John's College

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,  
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu)

This paper examines the actions that are considered real resistance, the intent of resistance, and the type of resistance exhibited in the novel *The Book Thief*. It also demonstrates theorist Scotts' categorization of the different forms of resistance by elaborating on organized resistance and everyday forms of resistance in the text. All the activities of the subaltern group are not considered as dispersed resistance; James C Scott describes a few techniques of everyday resistance that indirectly affected the power relations in the Nazi biopolitical regime. These were carried out by peasants in his work but they can be universally applied to all subaltern groups. The techniques mentioned by Scott and their exhibition by the Germans in the novel are enunciated.

The biopolitical governmentality in the Nazi regime operates on two types of power – biopower and disciplinary- that creates the possibility of the usage of more than one technique of resistance by the characters. Prior to the application of his theory to the novel, the suitability of it as the methodological framework for the resistance exhibited in this specific text is explored. Scott in “Everyday Forms of Resistance” elaborates on the possibility of indirect forms of resistance to the pervasive biopolitical power:

The types of activities that are present under everyday resistance are objected to by critics against getting categorized as a form of resistance because they hardly merit attention. They are merely considered as coping mechanisms that are non-political or done to meet personal needs. 'Real resistance' is said to be organized, principled, and to have revolutionary implications, whereas, the activities under everyday resistance are considered to be unorganized, individual, opportunistic, having no revolutionary consequences and most importantly, they are said to imply in their intention or logic an accommodation with the structure of domination. (Scott 50)

Scott agrees with the first statement "that 'resisters' rarely intend to make a revolution and their actions do not openly challenge existing power arrangements. The reason behind this being the mortal risks involved in open confrontation" (Scott 51), he criticizes the "safe-value" theory. He defends it by stating that "So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared, we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack of political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion" (Scott 199).

Scott defines the nature of this resistance as being relatively safe because of the small scale of the action. Each of these small events is undermined by the perpetrators because they are carried out beneath their view, escaping from their notice: they are often deliberately designed to be that way. However, these small events may eventually add up to a large event. Everyday forms of resistance rarely make headlines. "But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, a coral reef, thousands upon thousands of petty acts of insubordination and evasion create a political barrier reef of their own" (Scott 35, 49). To historically contextualize the instances of resistance displayed by the characters in the novel documentation on WWII state that, "opposition to the Nazi reign went from non-compliance with Nazi regulations to attempts to assassinate Hitler and the White Rose Movement (1942)" (USHMM). He states that since these events are small, they are mostly carried out by individuals, not as group strategies. He adds that there is no requirement for the resistance to take a collective form. And yet some level of cooperation is generally evident in everyday forms of resistance, as "the German resistance was not recognized as a collective united resistance movement during the height of Nazi Germany. It consisted of individual or small, isolated groups that were unable to mobilize widespread political opposition" (Klemperer 4-

5). Scott also states that cooperation or unity that is prevalent in this form of resistance is that they are invariably quiet, disguised, anonymous and often undeclared forms of resisting.

Under the varieties of practices utilized by the resisters, desertion occupies a significant space. “From a state-centric, historical view, many regime crises may be preoccupied with the cumulative impact of everyday forms of resistance that reach critical thresholds. This is perhaps most strikingly evident in the case of desertion from armies” (Scott 42). In World War II “15,000 German soldiers deserted the military and over 50,000 of them were killed for minor acts of insubordination” (Blakemore). The reason behind desertion could be for personal benefit but records show traces of resistance within the German army. “135 German soldiers refused orders to kill Jews, POWs or hostages” (Kitterman 248). Scott explains that these mutinous activities had a significant impact though they were not organized or coordinated by the participants or a leader.

Due to the small scale of the activities of resistance, Scott states that the techniques that are employed by the subaltern group in dispersed resistance are relatively safe. It is in rare circumstances that the perpetrators of these petty acts seek to call attention to themselves. This is because their safety lies in their anonymity. The striking characteristic of normal resistance as stated by Scott is its “pervasive use of disguise” (Scott 54). Almost all of the ordinary politics of subordinate groups historically has been a politics of dissimulation in which both the symbols and practices of resistance have been veiled, such as the usage of gossip, nicknames and character assassination in place of an open insult towards the authority. In addition to this, Scott states that there needs to be an alternation in the representation of the identity of the resister but also a deliberate effort made to change the nature of the action. He says that several forms of resistance employed under dangerous circumstances are intended to be ambiguous, to possess double meaning so that they cannot be treated as a direct, open challenge and hence, invite a direct and open retaliation. These are the aspects that Scott states are characteristic of everyday forms of resistance. The strategies that are undertaken are called “infra politics”, he states that “subaltern forms of resistance produce ‘hidden transcripts’, that is to say, critiques the power that escapes the notice of the dominant and contrast with the ‘public transcripts’ of power relations, which may contain no records of opposition. Such discretion allows the dominated to covertly resist being symbolically appropriated by the dominant” (Marche). Further, Scott states that the technique of resistance that is exhibited by the relatively powerless group includes acts such as “foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling,

poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, passivity, disloyalty and so on” (34).

In the novel, *The Book Thief*, the German family of Hubermann exhibit a form of resistance that can be considered as “infrapolitics” as defined by Scott, owing to the nature and strategies of resistance that are employed by them. The character of Frau Diller is described as a woman who ardently believes in the ideals of Nazism, this can be deduced from the fact that the narrator describes her purpose in life. She lives for her shop and her shop lives for the Third Reich. If people walked into her shop and did not say, *Heil Hitler*, they would not be served there. “The Nazi salute was adopted in the 1930s by Nazi Party to signal obedience to Hitler and glorify the German nation” (Kershaw 60). When Liesel and Rudy arrive at the shop, he reminds her to say *Heil*. Both Liesel and Rudy are Germans but their non-inclination towards the policies of Hitler can be observed when they show false compliance towards the Nazi ideals and practices. Rudy’s father, Alex Steiner is a member of the Nazi party but he is said to have no feelings of enmity or hostility towards the Jews. However, he does feel a sense of relief when Jewish shops are put out of business so that he might prosper. Although one of the primary principles of Nazism is anti-Semitism, Alex Steiner is discreet in his false compliance to Nazi Party’s political views but he remains a member due to the “mortal risk in open confrontation” (Scott 51). During the parade of the NSDAP sings *Germany over Everything*, among the people in the audience, some faces are contorted with pride and rally like Frau Diller, and then there were the scatterings of odd-men-out, such as Alex Steiner, who is described to have stood like a human-shaped block of wood, clapping slowly and dutifully. The parade of the Nazi party does not invoke nationalistic feelings from Alex Steiner but he outwardly shows support to ensure his safety.

On the occasion of Hitler’s birthday, the people in Molching hang the swastika flag to celebrate and express solidarity with him. The Hubermanns, who provide residence and safety for a Jewish individual from the Nazi reign, pretend to show compliance when they retrieve the flag from its obsolete state. On that day, after a brief search around the house, Liesel is thankful that they found the flag buried behind the accordion in the cupboard. It shows their lack of respect towards the flag and what it represents but since their nature of resistance is dispersive; they show false compliance by hosting it up.



“*Mein Kampf*, Hitler’s only complete book became the bible of Nazism in Germany during the Third Reich, it became required reading in Germany” (Britannica). It describes Hitler’s political ideology and future plans for Germany. Hans Hubermann unwillingly applies to get a membership in the Nazi party and he buys *Mein Kampf* on his return. Death narrates that, “Since, 1933, ninety per cent of Germans showed unflinching support for Adolf Hitler. That leaves ten per cent who didn’t. Hans Hubermann belonged to the ten per cent” (Zusak 65). He does not agree with Hitler’s ideology that comprises the book’s content nor does he want to involve himself in Nazi Party’s activities because he could not join a party that antagonized people in the way that the Nazi party did. Hence, he shows false compliance to avoid suspicion. Fear of punishment becomes the driving factor behind this practice in everyday resistance. The fact that Hans Hubermann did not join the party even after years of the Nazi regime shows his usage of the technique of avoidance as a means of resistance, as stated by Scott. In addition, he does apply and gets waitlisted later. Death narrates Hans’s thought process “Hans was not well-educated or political, but if nothing else, he was a man who appreciated fairness. Also, much like Alex Steiner, some of his most loyal customers were Jewish. He didn’t think the hatred could last, and it was a conscious decision to not follow Hitler” (Zusak 195). Hans and Alex, in their act of pretence to want to be a member of the Nazi party, exhibit dissimulation in concealing their thoughts and feelings towards the principles defining the Party. This also further proves Scott’s argument that although the characters are not political, their everyday actions become political when they are placed under an all-pervasive political structure.

When Germany gained victory over Poland, Hans Hubermann whispered to *Germany over Everything* without his voice being remotely patriotic. It is evident that he does not share Hitler’s nationalistic views towards his country. Instead of rejoicing over the victory of Germany in the war like the rest of the Germans, he mockingly comments on the enforced alliance to the policies of the Nazi party. He practices the technique of disloyalty in dispersed resistance by not politically supporting his country. Liesel is a member of the BDM (United German Girls), and she takes part in the book-burning ceremony as the other members do. In narrating the events that occurred in the ceremony, death says, “The books targeted for burning were those viewed as being subversive or as representing ideologies opposed to Nazism. These included books written by Jewish, communist, socialist, anarchist, pacifist, religious, liberal and secologist authors among others” (USHMM). In the novel, “book burning gave people who were partial to books the opportunity to get their hands on certain publications that they

otherwise wouldn't have. One person who was that inclined, as we know, was a thin-boned girl named Liesel Meminger" (Zusak 90). There was a prevalence of the condemnation of books which carried ideals that differed from the ones laid down by Nazism but Liesel exhibits disloyalty to her obligation as a member of the BDM by stealing one of the banned books called *The Shoulder Shrug*. A book, although fictional, said to be written by a Jew about a Jew. The authorities' problem with the book was that its protagonist was a Jew, and he was presented in a positive light. Hans Hubermann also encourages Liesel to show false compliance when she states that she hates Hitler for taking her mother and father away. He tells her that she cannot publicly denounce Hitler but that she can say that in their house. Just to never say it on the street, at school, at the BDM out in public.

Hans Hubermann is also called "The Jew Painter" by the people in Molching in the novel. "The day Hans blew it, on the verge of joining the Party. Everyone knew you were not supposed to paint over slurs written on a Jewish shop front. He had been called 'Der Juden Maler' – for painting Jewish houses" (Zusak 112). In another instance, in 1937, the windows of a clothing store named Kleinman's were shattered. A star, in the colour of mustard, was smeared on the doors of houses with Jewish inhabitants and on their shops. In sloppy lettering, the words JEWISH FILTH were written over at their edges. Hans had painted Joel Kleinman's (owner of the shop) house the previous year and he also repainted the door of the shop as he had offered before. This was observed by Rolf Fischer, one of Molching's greatest Nazis, Hans was not granted the membership of the Nazi party. "There was widespread violence and hooliganism directed towards Jewish businesses and individuals" (Rubenstein 123-124). In 1933, Nazi party Newspaper on March 31 announced that 'world Jewry' had ruined the German people and wanted to make this boycott a publicly propelled anti-Semitic action" (Stoltzfus 89). In the novel, the propaganda informs Alex Steiner that it is only a matter of time before a plague of Jewish tailors shows up and steals all his customers at the tailor shop. The Jewish businesses were destroyed and boycotted in order to systemically push the Jews into economic struggle. It is also an anti-Semitic effort taken by the Nazis but Hans Hubermann displays disloyalty to the Nazi ideals by offering to paint a Jew's door and painting over Jewish slurs in the past.

Walter Kugler is a German street boxer and Max's friend from childhood, he aids Max who is of Jewish origin to escape from being taken to the concentration camps. He provides him with bread, a hiding place and a ticket to get to Molching. He is a part of the army but he reaches out to Hans to request if Max could reside and

hide in his house. Walter leaves behind his obligations as a soldier in the German army and helps a Jew; it is an act of resistance, and he shows disloyalty towards the German army. This technique is also exhibited by Hans Hubermann, his wife and Liesel when he accepts the request to provide shelter for Max to hide and they conceal this secret from the authorities, and other Germans.

In one of the later chapters, Hans publicly displays his disloyalty forgetting his surroundings and out of his humanity. When the Nazi army takes Jews to the concentration camp near Molching, Hans comes across an old, hungry Jew. The Jew stands before Hans, expecting to be ridiculed as he is used to but Hubermann holds out his hand and presents a piece of bread for him to eat. Immediately, Hans gets punished with whippings for his act of disloyalty in public by the soldiers in the Nazi army.

At the Hitler Youth meeting, Franz Deutscher asks Rudy Steiner, for the birth date of Adolf Hitler as it is mandatory to know these details being a part of the Hitler Youth. Rudy, who knew the answer, was April 20, 1899, but answers the question with the birth date of Christ. On another occasion, Rudy comes across Deutscher and they get into a physical fight Franz repeats the question for Rudy to answer correctly this time. Rudy Steiner, however, responds it is on Easter Monday which earns him a haircut from Franz with a knife. Rudy shows resistance to the authority of Deutscher by using the dispersive technique of feigned ignorance.

Avoidance of authority is another act of resistance that is common in everyday forms of resistance. Children and teenagers in Germany were expected to be a part of the Hitler Youth program to have the ideologies of Hitler taught to them. Rudy Steiner is a part of the Hitler Youth but after the two incidents with Franz, he begins to skip the meetings. Rudy did not stop going straight away to display that he was not afraid of Deutscher but after a few weeks, Rudy ceased his involvement altogether. His parents threatened him but he did not attend. It was the opportunity to join a different division that swayed Rudy and prevented his parents from being fined for non-attendance. Later in the novel, Rudy gets recruited into the Nazi school for getting the best scores in class and his athletic ability. However, Rudy's mother strongly refuses to let him join the school program. Even when the recruiters resumed their arguments, they were silenced again by Barbara Steiner's pleas. In refusing their child to join the Nazi school where they intend to create a future with a new class of physically and mentally advanced

Germans, the Steiners employ avoidance, and desertion as forms of resistance by not letting Rudy be a part of the Nazi's program.

The resistance that the German characters show is dispersed in its technique and in its characteristics. None of the resistance that is exhibited is organized; they are all carried out by the individual characters. They are all small-scale in nature, such as feeding bread to the Jews, hosting the swastika flag without a sense of nationalism, painting over Jewish slurs etc, The acts are also not direct challenges; the characters refrain from openly confronting Nazi officials or supporters in resisting. There is a pervasive use of disguise, as Liesel and Rudy keep their anonymous status by providing the Jews with bread by hiding behind the trees from the soldiers. Thus, the paper argues that the resistance exhibited in the novel *The Book Thief* is in-direct – an everyday form of resistance to the invisible biopower.

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