

**Role of Holding Environment in Facilitating the Maturation of  
Adolescents with Traumatic Childhood Experiences: A Case  
Study of Kambili Achike of *Purple Hibiscus* and Liesel Meminger  
of *The Book Thief***

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**Abstract**

The objective of the paper is to investigate the role of holding environment in the maturation of adolescents with traumatic childhood experiences. The subjects of the study are Kambili Achike of *Purple Hibiscus* (2007) and Liesel Meminger of *The Book Thief* (2005). They belong to different historical timelines and socio-cultural backgrounds, but have the common feature of undergoing painful journey of trauma-recovery. In the process, both are facilitated, albeit in different ways, by their holding environment. Methodology involves a close reading of the two texts from the focal point of the Winnicottian concepts of ‘Holding Environment’ and Good Enough Mother’, and Bowlby’s idea of ‘Secure Base’. The study has found that compassionate parenting, good-enough mothering, integrity in value system, promotion of self-determination and self-esteem, availability of role-models, peers and transitional objects fare as common elements in both the protagonists’ journey from trauma recovery to healthy maturation.

**Keywords:** Adolescent Maturation; Trauma Recovery; Holding Environment; *Purple Hibiscus*; *The Book Thief*; Good-enough mothering; Compassionate caregiving; Adolescent self-determination

### **1. Introduction: The Process of Adolescent Maturation**

Adolescence broadly refers to the phase that bridges childhood and adulthood. Traditionally, this stage is recognized as occurring between the ages of 12 and 18, roughly aligning with the onset of puberty—marked by hormonal changes. During this time, individuals typically experience shifts in their social and educational environments, such as spending less time with parents and more with peers, alongside an increase in personal autonomy. Eric Erikson, in his eight-staged concept of psychosocial development, places adolescence in the binary conflict zone of “Identity vs Role Confusion”, in which, teens explore who they are and who they want to become. They search for alignment and affiliation to a value system, as they step out of parental guidance and explore the territory of peer influence (Erikson, 1980). As observed by Casey *et al* (2010), adolescence is more of a developmental phase rather than merely a fixed timeframe, given its considerable variability in behaviour and development. Since the stage involves an adolescent’s initial-stage independent exploration of the surrounding microsystems (family, school, friends circle, etc), supportive environment is a prerequisite to prevent adverse encounters from leaving prolonged impact on him/her (NASEM *et al.*, 2019). Adolescents search for a structure in their surrounding environment, in order to gestate a future identity that is both believable and attainable. Consistency in value standards observed around in the behaviour of adults helps adolescents negotiate the process of self-identity (Ianni, qtd in Adams and Marshall 437). Adams and Marshall add further specificity to this finding by stating that identity-formation sets its fulcrum on five bases: a. sense of uniqueness (positive self-belief fostered by parental reinforcements to the child’s emotions and behaviour); b. self-determination (ability to make independent choices and opinions), i.e.

freedom to act (ability to enact upon self-choices); c. affiliation to a value-system—be it of parents, role-model or peers; d. recognition or social approval; e. sense of social responsibility and equity (ability to undertake tasks for others that are physically difficult but morally rewarding) (438-439). Developing a sense of self is arguably a narrative process, since it requires a focalization, a value coherence, and a sense of purposeful continuity from a historical beginning to a future goal or achievement. Subjective understanding of the self is always an evolving process—it assimilates the “revised narratives” encountered at marked junctures of life experiences (Sveningsson and Alvesson, qtd. in Kulkarni 191). The holding environment forms the scaffold for all the processes of adolescent maturation mentioned above. It provides discursive materials and social support, which render clarity to who one is; what he/she might become; and how he/she wants to be perceived by others (Brown, qtd. in Kulkarni 191). The objective of the paper is to closely investigate the role of holding environment in the maturation of adolescents with traumatic childhood experiences. The subject of the study will be the protagonists of two novels, Kambili Achike (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2007) and Liesel Meminger (*The Book Thief*, 2005). Both the protagonists undergo painful journey of trauma-recovery, and both are facilitated, albeit in different ways, by their holding environment. The objective of the investigation is to identify the prominent elements in the holding environment that have strong bearings on adolescent maturation of a trauma-exposed child.

## **2. Background**

### **2a. Literature review: *Purple Hibiscus***

There has been an adequate body of literature on *Purple Hibiscus* that focusses on the themes of domestic violence; silence as a tool of oppression; trauma recovery; childhood; evolving ideological stance of the protagonist; female empowerment; and, reclamation of identity (Azuike, 2009; Zanou et.al., 2018; Nwokocha, 2019; Begum, 2017; Ifechelobi, 2014; Nabutanyi, 2017; Abubakr, 2016). It has been argued that ideology (a system of beliefs and

ideas) becomes a zone of evolution for Kambili, as she learns to outgrow her father's parochial interpretation of the world. The balanced approach of Ifeoma towards religion on one hand, and the humane approach of Father Amadi towards Christian principles on the other, help Kambili become more inclusive in her sense of reality (Tunca, 2009; Subba, 2014). Reclamation of identity and self-empowerment is directly correlated with the emotional reinforcements and psychological succour received by Kambili from Aunty Ifeoma (Lindecrantz, 2022). The theme of problematic parent-child relationship--as shown through Kambili and Eugene, places the novel in the category of the third generation of Nigerian Literature, where childhood is shown as an emergent concept that negotiates for a space between alternative memories and the father figures (Ouma, 2009). The theme of coming-of-age has been argued from the view-point of mourning, where it is argued that the anguish felt by Kambili of being distanced from her grandfather—and later, separated from his portrait, is the reason of her recalcitrance towards Eugene (Dalziell, 2010). Other works attempt a revelation of the above-mentioned thematic dynamics through a stylistic analysis of *Purple Hibiscus* (Osubande, 2009; Yeibo and Akerele, 2014; Kabore, 2014; Karak and Bengal, 2015; Chukwukaelo, 2016; Suleiman *et al.*, 2023; Olusola and Alabi, 2024). Even though sufficient attention is paid to the theme of Kambili's coming of age and her journey through trauma and patriarchal parochialisms, the role of holding environment in facilitating this journey has been unexplored as yet. A study in this angle will mount Kambili's trajectory of maturation on the parameters and scaffolds of general psychosocial development, such that, the novel can become a case study in intervention to reclaim the process of maturation of traumatized children.

## **2b. Literature review: *The Book Thief***

There is a rich corpus of research work done on the novel *The Book Thief*. Researchers have focussed on trauma recovery (Stone, 2014; Merdifa, 2018; Peng and Hua, 2020; Burakova, 2021; Sabitha *et al.*, 2022); adolescent maturation (Coats, 2011); narrative style (Mattera, 2014;

Nedelčevová, 2018); portrayal of holocaust and the maturation of the adolescent amid it (Kirk, 2010; Yoder, 2018); reading/literacy as a medium of healing trauma and finding meaning in one's sufferings (Kapetanovic, 2016; Kushmi, 2024); constructing identity (Asma, 2018) and developing resilience to take on the challenge of future experiences (Dominguez-Rue, 2019). Yoder's work focuses on the symptoms of trauma in Liesel; how Hans Huberman's voice and accordion serve as a soothe, and how writing helps Liesel reconnect with her emotions and recover from trauma. Asma's work focuses on the three distinct stages of trauma recovery and maturation in Liesel: a. from idealism to realism (when Liesel accepts the death of her brother and the permanent absence of her mother), b. from indecisiveness to decisiveness (when Liesel decides to become literate, and to save as much books as possible from Nazi vandalism), and c. from immaturity to taking decisive actions (when she overcomes her hate for the written word and begins to write the story of her journey). From the above review, it becomes apparent that there is a scope of studying Liesel's journey of trauma-recovery and maturation from the viewpoint of general psychosocial development. By casting such study of Liesel's with Kambili's (of *Purple Hibiscus*) in a canvas of temporo-spatial contradistinction, to observe the similarities among the obvious differences, one can generalize the absolutely necessary factors in the holding environment that help an adolescent with traumatic childhood experiences, to attain maturation.

## **2c. Scholarly Works on Adolescent Maturation**

### **2c i. Winnicott's Holding Environment: The "Good Enough Mother"**

The concept of holding environment is given by Donald Winnicott, who highlights the necessity of a conducive environment to shield the child from the randomness of the surrounding environment, till the time the child is ready to be safely introduced to it, at a manageable pace (Winnicott, 1965; 2007). A child inherently possesses the instincts to move on from absolute dependence to relative independence when placed under a nurturing

environment of physical and emotional support (Winnicott, 2002). A successful transpiration of this journey ensures a balanced sense of self in the child, which informs his/her capacity to build healthy relationships with others (Casher, 2013). Assuming the mother to be the primary caregiver generally available to a child, Winnicott elaborates the provisions of the holding environment through the term, 'good enough mother'. According to him, an effective caregiver places her/himself in a near-perfect—rather than totally perfect—alignment with the infant's needs, to promote adaptive behaviour in the child (1967, 26-33); (1953, 89-97). To claim that any given environment is good enough is to agree with all of the following statements:

- There are sufficient benefits to fulfil the physical and emotional needs of sustenance for the child. (For example, a child receives nourishment and assurance of safety from her care-giver).
- There are no critical problems. (The child has no marked physical ailments or psychological afflictions that may call for special attention from the caregiver.).
- The benefits sufficiently outweigh the problems. (For example, the unpleasant experience of separation from the mother while going to school, may be adapted to, with the help of teachers and peers. Though they do not replace parental care, they are good enough to launch the child into newer experiences).
- In the 'present' situation, and all things considered, further improvement would be more harmful than helpful. (Facilitating the child to delay his/her adjustment with the peers and teachers may actually impair her ability to adapt).

Thus, the concept of "good enough" is not an acceptance of mediocrity. Rather, it is a negotiated act of balance between the caregiver and the child, wherein the caregiver raises the standards, owns up to his/her limitations, and promotes the mindset of self-exploration in a child to tackle situations (Ratnapalan and Batty, 2009). Sustenance—both physical and emotional, and

resourcefulness are thus observed as the two important elements of a holding environment under good-enough mothering.

### **2c ii. Bowlby's Concept of Secure Base**

Similar to Dr Winnicott, a concept of nurturing environment is given by Edward Bowlby in his 'Attachment Theory', which stresses that a child instinctively searches for emotional attachment with at least one caregiver—usually, but not always a parent, in order to learn emotional resilience (Bowlby, qtd in Plechowicz 7). Secure base represents any meaningful relationship (with parents / peers/ caregivers) which may provide emotional sustenance and reinforcement to the child, when faced with threat, loss, illness or any such adverse experiences (McCann 9). As the child grows into adolescence, he/she adapts his/her behavioural strategies accordingly, thus transitioning from the necessity of direct physical safety to more of an emotional or perceived support (Allen & Land, 1999; Cummings & Davies, 1996). Since transacting with the external environment is an inevitable process of maturation, the search for a secure base is an instinctual need felt by a child (Pumell, qtd in Plechowicz 7), and he/she will reach out to the primary caregiver for support. If the caregiver is attentive, empathetic and comforting, secure attachment is created, which eventually helps the child build psychological resourcefulness to tackle moments of anxiety and insecurity in a self-reliant way (Holmes, qtd. In Plechowicz 7). The concept of secure base is observed as a crucial factor in inducing recovery from trauma (McCann 9).

### **2c iii. Impact of Secure Base in Developing Psychological Flexibility and Pro-social behaviour**

Psychological flexibility comes with emotional intelligence, when the child becomes capable of regulating his/her emotions and becomes attentive towards other's needs. Children with psychological flexibility show tendencies of pro-social behaviour, i.e. ability to undertake actions that are value-aligned, even though they appear difficult or unpleasant (Kashdan and

Rottenberg, qtd. in Biglan *et al.* 10). The skills of cooperation, the capacity to understand perspectives, and the ability to undertake difficult but morally correct actions come under prosocial behaviour. (Kashdan and Rottenberg, qtd in Biglan *et al.*, 10; National Academies of Sciences *et al.*, 2016). Thus, psychological flexibility contributes to self-determination, as the child develops willingness to act independently. It has been observed that emotional and behavioural competence are closely followed by social competence, which involves a child's ability to get along with others in the society, especially the members of different race, ethnicity, religion or economic background. The more a child feels securely attached to his/her caregiver and the secure-base, the better he/she is able to mitigate relational disruptions and cultivate resilience (Howard and Medway, 2004; McLaughlin & Lambert, 2017; Pynoos *et al.*, 1999; Nicholls *et al.*, 2014; Gilbert and Sifers, 2011). Secure parent-child attachments promote prosocial behaviour like being attentive to others' needs (Sroufe *et al.*, 1999; Coulombe and Yates, 2022). In cases of inadequacy in forming secure attachment with a parent, therapeutic alliance with a caregiver (such as a role model) becomes necessary in inculcating self-regulation (Nakanishi *et al.* 2019). A secure attachment with a caregiver gives an adolescent a monitored space to manage emotional arousals like anger, fear, distress, humiliation, etc. and thus mitigates chances of developing negative consequences like internalization (depression, anxiety, etc) and externalization (aggressive behaviour) (National Academies of Sciences, *et al.*, 2016). A healthy maturation is thus marked by competence in emotional, behavioural and social aspects, with a strong sense of self founded on an accepted set of values from role-models / securely-attached care-givers.

#### **2c iv. Impact of Parenting Style in Adolescent development**

It has been observed that though context plays a role in determining a child's response to a particular parenting style, there is a correlation between compassionate parenting and prosocial outcomes, i.e. self-esteem and value-internalisations. Adolescents from indulgent and

authoritative families have reportedly scored well on measures of socialization and well-being, whereas adolescents belonging to neglectful and authoritarian families have consistently reported to have poor self-esteem (Martinet *et al.*, qtd in Kirby 3). More than a specific style of parenting, what is being highlighted here is the perceived sense of affiliative behaviour experienced by the children. Adolescents who experience punitive parenting practices, operate from a threat-based system of self-preservation. Since the caregiver activates threat-perception instead of affiliative behaviour, the adolescent experiences a conflict in motive, which eventually leads to value confusion (because of the baulked process of filial attachment); self-blame (self being the only available variable within control); reinforced belief of unworthiness (as a consequence of self-blame), and consequently, poor self-esteem (normalising maltreatment of self). Compassion-based parenting involves two key aspects: a. ability to detect the signals of suffering through sensitivity and awareness; and, b. taking active steps to alleviate / prevent suffering through active physiological processes (eg. facial expression, vocal tone, touch) in order to regulate emotions and promote psychological well-being. Compassion-based parenting ensures both sympathy and empathy being provided to the child. For example, the caregiver should be sympathetic enough to feel moved, rather than irritated whenever a child sends distress signals; and, he/she should be empathetic enough to assess the particular need behind the distress signal, eg. pain, hunger, anxiety, etc. Empathy also includes a careful regulation of help provided to the child in times of distress, so as to make the latter capable of coping (Kirby 4-9). Thus, empathy in compassion-focussed parenting, as perceived by Kirby, aligns with the Winnicottian concept of good-enough mother. These concepts of secure attachment, empathy, and compassion-based parenting are important to understand the ideal factors that are necessary for the holding environment of an adolescent. Insufficiency in these factors, as observed in highly controlling parental styles, baulks the efforts of cognitive

independence in an adolescent, often leading to poor social skills, internalization (i.e. anxiety and depression), and externalization (i.e. risky behaviours) (McElhaney *et al.*, 2009).

## **2c v. Trauma in Adolescents: Causes; Impacts**

Childhood trauma covers a broad spectrum of adverse experiences that occur during the formative years of a person's life, ranging from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse to parental neglect, household dysfunction, or exposure to violence (Goodman 187; Mahajan and Kaur 59; Kpeno *et al.* 13-15). Other causes of trauma include death or separation of a close relative; threat to physical integrity—at home or among peers (Malizia); certain parenting styles involving excessive psychological control and sarcasm (Dickson, Laursen, Valdes *et al.* 15); manipulative love relationships that use guilt as a weapon for compliance (McElhaney *et al.* 368); and, high parental expectations leading to severe self-criticism (Shahar, 2021). At its core, childhood trauma disrupts the fundamental sense of safety and security that children rely on for a healthy development. Impact of traumatic events in children can be seen through any of the following markers: a. Dissociation (separation of the thinking self from the experiencing self); b. Inability to form attachments (relationships with peers or other people); c. Re-enactment (replaying the event of trauma in mind, to establish a sense of control and connectedness); d. Long-term effect on later adulthood (in terms of physical and mental health problems); and e. Impairment in emotional capacities (hyper-arousal and compromised ability to regulate moods; night terror; anxiety; somatization, etc) (Goodman 187-188). Studies show that children who are exposed to domestic violence may struggle academically and behaviourally, and may as well face relationship challenges (Shen & Xu, 4). As such, they are likely to develop internalizing (depression) or externalizing (engaging in altercations and fights with peers) behavioural symptoms (Howell *et al.*, 43-57). The child may hold him/herself responsible for the suffering of the battered parent. He/she may have mixed attitude towards the abusive parent—alternating between generous and terrifying (The National Child

Traumatic Stress Network, 8). Memory deficit, speech disorder, anxiety, dissociation, aggressive behaviour, difficulty in expressing emotions, poor span of attention, and social aloofness are the major impacts of traumatic experience, seen in adolescents (Gerson & Rappaport, 138).

### **2c vi. Strategies to Cope with Trauma: Problem-focussed vs Emotion Focussed**

Children employ various cognitive and behavioural strategies to deal with life events that are potentially harmful for psychological adjustment. The strategies are broadly categorized as problem-focussed and emotion-focussed. The former is an action-oriented active approach. The latter is an avoidance approach, involving refusal to strategize and trying to gloss over a problem as a tolerable situation (Lazarus & Folkman, qtd. in Planellas et al., 2020). In other words, problem-focussed approach allows a child to process his/her emotions and seek active support to cope with it, whereas emotion-focussed approach tends to make a child delusional, and pushes him/her to construct a glossed perception of the felt reality because he/she feels powerless to accept the experience as is.

### **2c vii. Trauma Recovery: Using Transitional Objects and Compassionate Caregiving**

Recovery from trauma requires prolonged intervention and specific approaches based on cases. The first step to healing a traumatic child involves removing/reducing the impact of the causative factors of trauma. Two major reasons may be: i. separation from the attached person; ii. insecure attachment with the immediate care-givers due to incongruencies in the holding environment. Usage of transitional objects and facilitation of compassionate caregiving may prove instrumental in addressing these two factors, respectively.

#### **2c vii a. Transitional Objects**

Children who suffer the loss of a loved person, or is separated from them, generally latch onto an external object—an artefact / toy / a piece of cloth as a coping mechanism. It holds subjective importance to the child as it acts as a psychological conduit to the attached

person *in absentia*. Such an object helps the child to re-structure the memory, reduce stress, and cope with depression or anxiety (Roig *et al.* 49). This aligns with the Object Relations Theory of Winnicott (1953), which shows attachment to transitional objects as an important part of a child's journey towards reduced dependency on the mother/caregiver. Through it, the child experiences a safe transition from the psychic inner reality of wishes and desires, i.e. "me", to the external world of intersubjectively verifiable things, i.e. "not-me". Conversely, when such an artefact is lost/ taken away prematurely, the child is baulked at the process of achieving inner cohesion and thus feels greatly distressed.

### **2c vii b. Compassionate Care-giving**

Compassionate parenting plays a crucial role in the emotional resuscitation of a trauma-exposed child. Affiliative behaviour from caregivers—like positive re-reinforcements and projection of stable value-system in the surrounding environment, serve as strong interventions to resuscitate a damaged sense of self and inculcate purposefulness in the traumatized child (Jamil *et al.* 13-17; Biglan *et al.* 257; Adams and Marshall, 1996; Kulkarni, 2024). The term compassionate care-giving encompasses all the media of affiliative behaviour available to the child, including such received from extended family, peers, friends, role models, medical practitioners as well as counsellors. For the requirement of the upcoming analysis, the following constituent points of holding environment will be included under secure base and compassionate care-giving: a. affiliative behaviour—providing succour during insecure moments, especially that of unregulated emotions; allowing problem-solving and explorative mindset; providing guidance whenever there is an attempt to over-reach; b. demonstrating coherence in value-oriented behaviour; c. helping reconcile value-clashes; d. helping narrativize a sense of self, from past identity to future goals.

### 3. Methodology

The researcher proposes to mount the adolescent experiences of the two protagonists, Kambili Achike of *Purple Hibiscus* (by C.N. Adichie, 2007, and Liesel Meminger of *The Book Thief* (by M. Zusak, 2016) along the theoretical points of healthy maturation, trauma and trauma recovery as discussed above. The age, the respective life-events and the response of the two protagonists to the same display a modicum of similarity. Both of them are teenagers with adverse childhood experiences which impact their respective emotional, behavioural and social lives. Interestingly, the temporo-spatial realities of the two protagonists are different—Kambili belongs to the timeline of 1990s' Nigeria, whereas Liesel, a small town of Germany in the middle of the Second World War (i.e. between 1938 and 1945). Also, there is difference in their material reality as well—the former is the daughter of an affluent and influential industrialist in Nigeria; the latter is given up by her poverty-stricken, politically-embattled biological mother to be raised in a foster-household, where the care-givers struggle to make ends meet. In spite of such differences, there are common grounds of trauma recovery and maturation observed in the two protagonists, only to indicate certain predominant features in the holding environment that prove to be non-negotiable in order to form a secure base for the two adolescents.

### 4. Objective of the study

- a. To prove that incongruencies in the holding environment may lead to traumatic experiences in children, that impact their emotional, behavioural and social outcomes.
- b. To prove that certain elements in the holding environment are extremely necessary and non-negotiable for the process of the healing and maturation of trauma-exposed adolescents.

## 5. Discussion

### 5a i. Story outline of *Purple Hibiscus*

*Purple Hibiscus* is a first-person narrative recounting the journey of maturation of the fourteen-year-old protagonist, Kambili Achike, who is the daughter of a wealthy and influential businessman, Eugene Achike, in Enugu, Nigeria. Set in the post-colonial Nigeria of the 1990s, the story explores the impact of domestic violence on children; the processes adopted by the such victims to cope with grief; the role of extended family and other acquaintances in exacerbating or alleviating the situation, and finally, an evolution in the coping strategies to recover from trauma. Formation of identity takes place within the backdrop of religious dogmatism (Christianity) and clash of cultural values (Christian values versus Igbo ideals). The storyline culminates with Kambili and Jaja (her sibling) rebelling against the oppressive regime of Eugene, and becoming more assertive in expressing inclinations towards Ifeoma, their aunt. The final action sees Beatrice—the mother, poisoning Eugene, and Jaja taking blame for the death to shield the family. The novel ends with the prospect of Jaja to be released from jail after three years of imprisonment, and a promise that all the three survivors of violence would live fully and cherish their new-found dignity. The first-person subjective narrator is a crucial choice for this novel, as it allows for the recounting of the lived horrors and the painful process of self-evolution experienced by Kambili.

### 5 a ii. Causes of trauma—incongruencies in the holding environment; secure base, and the impacts therein

Kambili hails from an affluent household where she is well-provided for. The best of nutrition and education is afforded to her. Lavish family dinners and feasts for others is common in her household—both in Enugu and Abba (*Purple Hibiscus* 12-13; 21; 56; 96-98). The residences at Enugu and Abba where she lives bespeaks of opulence (41; 55). She studies in an elite missionary school where her father is a generous benefactor. However, her father

makes it clear that outperforming others academically is a criteria Kambili must scale (39). That she has to align by the routine set by her father. That she is not allowed to stray for a single moment after school hours, but has to rush back home or face dire consequences. Anything less than the topmost rank earns her public humiliation from her father. This restricts her social life and self-esteem severely. But the overarching lacunae she faces in her holding environment is value-confusion, as she watches her socially-active, philanthropic father batter her mother and subject the household to complete subservience. She watches her mother bear the suffering silently, and avoid conversing about the topic directly. Also, after every such episode of violence, the perpetrator enforces a narrative of God-motivated justification on the victims. This is resonant with McElhaney's observations on guilt as a weapon of compliance in manipulative love relationships (368). This felt anomaly in the perceived value-system makes Kambili insecurely attached to her dominant parent, as she cannot completely accept her Papa's actions, and glosses over her reactions (32; 102). In consequence, she starts internalizing, i.e. re-enacting in mind the scenes of miscarriage; stuttering and choking during conversations; unwilling to speak with peers; and, dissociating her thinking self from her feeling self during moments of violence (102; 210-211). She becomes insecurely attached to her biological parents—one, volatile in temperament; the other, too meek to protest. In fact, the threat-based parenting style of Eugene Achike confuses Kambili, as she cannot determine her father's true motives, and so, is never sure of adopting his values. Her sense of uniqueness becomes transactive—contingent upon Papa's endorsement. As a result, she has very low self-esteem. Also, she displays no willingness to plan for her life, as Eugene controls her daily routines rigidly (79). She is not exempt of his schedule even when away on break (124). Also, she has no opinion of her own other than echoing Papa's views in glorious eulogies (13). This psychological dependence prevents her from undertaking acts of self-determination. She struggles to achieve coherence in her cultural identity because of her father's dogmatic

Christian principles (107) and double standards (81; 87). He entertains the Igbo overlord Igwe in his household (to show off his social heft) (93-94), but debar his own father, the traditionalist Papa Nwukwu—whom he condemns as heathen—to come near his children or teach them Igbo rituals. Kambili admires the confidence of Amaka and Obiora in transacting both the traditional and the modern ways of life (81-83; 137-138), but does not know how to inculcate it. This is seen in her inability to answer questions, take part in their conversations, silent admiring of Amaka and Ifeoma (85; 88), her feeling of guilt in appreciating Papa Nwukwu's Igbo rituals, and her dread of being discovered by her father. She experiences a cultural barrier, whenever she has to transact between the two worlds. For example, she does not join Father Amadi in his rosary recitation, because they are sung in Igbo. She keeps her lips tightly pursed, lest she gets carried away to join in (139). Clearly, this indicates a confusion in identity formation, arising out of confusion in cultural affiliation. Another noteworthy feature contributing to Kambili's baulked sense of identity, is her discomfort with body image and nakedness. Forced by Eugene's dictates, Kambili abstains from make-up, fancy dresses (80), even staring at the mirror to appreciate her body image. She feels uncomfortable at the mention of her youthful body by Ifeoma (72), and looks away when Amaka changes in front of her (117). This denial of accepting her growing body makes her stick to the infantile image imposed on her by Eugene. As a result, she is unable to act her age around her peers. Even if she puts on make-up in one instance, she is prompted by her lack of self-belief to wipe it off immediately. All these facts indicate that Kambili is an insecurely attached child with a poor sense of self whose narrative of self-identity is incoherent, and whose prospects of self-determination is vague. To sum up, the following lacunae are observed in Kambili's holding environment at Eugene Achike's household: i. threat to physical integrity due to exposure to violence; ii. Threat-based parenting style, granting no freedom of thought and action, impacting self-esteem, self-determination and peer communication; iii. lack of compassionate

caregiving—no scope to clarify doubts; to express independent thoughts; to undertake independent actions; iv. unstable value system impacting the formation of identity-narrative. As a result—Kambili develops symptoms of trauma and adopts the coping mechanism of emotion-based responses like delusion, hallucination, choking, self-blame, etc—all of which align with the various indicators of stress as discussed in the literature review.

### **5 a iii. Adjustments in Kambili's Holding environment for Trauma Recovery; evidences of recovery**

On the initiative of Aunt Ifeoma, Kambili, along with her sibling, temporarily shifts to Nsukka to live with their cousins. There, she experiences a massive difference in the holding environment. Unlike their father's household, the living quarters are not plush—the washrooms even lack running water. There is scarcity of electricity and gas. Devoid of the monetary affluence like Eugene, Aunt Ifeoma and her family has to face first-hand the impacts on external disturbances like riots, price-hikes, threats from soldiers, etc. They have to be resourceful to keep food on the table. However, there is a spirit of free-thinking and value-integrity, that immediately catches on Kambili. Aunt Ifeoma promotes debate and dialogism among her children, and takes pride when they scale the bars that she keeps on raising. Embodying the concept of 'good enough' mothering, she allows her children to take responsibility of household chores; discuss budgeting and funds; plan for food rations and, troubleshoot household issues. However, Ifeoma is always there as a scaffold whenever the need arises--be it making Obiora stand down in front of the imminent threats of soldiers (231), or reprimand Amaka, Obiora and Kambili when they do not behave as respectfully or assertively as expected in their respective situations (170; 245). Punishments are logicalized, so that the sense of guilt is based on concrete grounds of acceptable behaviour (245), rather than amorphous domains of metaphysical violations (as promoted by Eugene, who promotes disciplining as a punishment from God). In Nsukka, Kambili takes the baby steps to recognize

her body-image, as she grows comfortable wearing shorts and makeup. Also, Kambili is introduced to a balanced view of the world—between Catholic Christian values and that of native Igbo traditions. Kambili overcomes her fear of perdition—as conditioned by her father—to live with her grandparent Papa Nwukwu. She listens to his stories; watches him perform the traditional prayer *iti nzu* (166-168), and also clarifies her religious doubts with Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi (81; 87; 175-179). Under the influence of Amaka, she also gets introduced to native pop singers. This settles down the value-confusion in her, and also makes her appreciate her cultural moorings. Having acquired a semblance of coherence in her self-identity through a felt secure-base, Kambili becomes assertive. She takes the brutal beatings of her father to protect the painting of Papa Nwukwu. This can be seen as her first step to self-determination. She even names her father as the perpetrator to Amaka. This shows that she has stepped out of her delusional self, overcoming the necessity of glossing over her father's actions, and carrying the guilt for him. The compassion—expressed through verbal soothe and non-verbal proximity (Amaka, Father Amadi, Auntie Ifeoma) makes Kambili come to terms with her emotions and cultivate self-esteem. This can be seen as compassionate care-giving promoting a sense of secured-base in a trauma-exposed adolescent. The immediate effect is an improvement in Kambili's social relationships—her friends at school come and talk to her in the hospital; Kambili herself becomes assertive and conversant with Amaka and Father Amadi. The impact of good-enough mothering of Ifeoma catches on her, and she embraces self-determinism—as seen in her participation in the household chores; participation in sprinting; donning of shorts and make up, and finally, declaring her love to Father Amadi. The impact of value-integrity in Ifeoma's household—experienced through the compassionate parenting style of Ifeoma—clarifies Kambili's confusions on cultural identity sexuality. Father Amadi helps her negotiate a balanced space between Christian and Igbo faith. All these helps her gain self-esteem and stabilize the narrative of her self-identity. Consequently, this promotes her capacity

of problem-focussed approach to life's problems. She helps her mother run the household after her father's death and Jaja's imprisonment. She keeps masses for her father; empathizes with her mother, and expresses her love freely to Father Amadi (303-304). This indicates that she has acquired the skills of emotional self-regulation, overcoming her tendency of delusions and dissociations. Thus, the following elements in the holding environment act as healing factors for Kambili's trauma:

- i. Emotional availability of care-giver—support in negotiating religious confusion; amorphous sexual identity.
- ii. Value-integrity—dialogism and free-thinking are accepted, but not disrespectful behaviour to others.
- iii. Compassionate parenting—provision of verbal empathy and emotionally intelligent support till the time Kambili comes to terms with her reality and begins acknowledging her feeling openly.
- iv. Provision of transitional object which helps Kambili tide over feelings of estrangement (from Ifeoma's family).
- v. Good-enough mothering—promoting resourcefulness; psychomotor engagements, alongside scaffolding and disciplining.

#### **5 a iv. Comparison of both the holding environments to identify the non-negotiable factors for adolescent maturation**

As observed in the case-study of Kambili Achike, availability of nourishment, comfortable shelter, and protection from the exigencies of the external environment may be desirable—as seen in Ifeoma's children's reactions to Eugene's (92-96), but not at the cost of self-esteem and self-integrity—as seen in their defiance as well (251). Compassion-based parenting promotes the sense of secure base that helps an adolescent explore confusions regarding value-driven actions, religious beliefs, cultural values and sexual identity—

which, in turn, inculcate problem-focussed approach to trauma recovery. Good-enough mothering promotes resourcefulness, self-determination and dialogism, which, in turn, encourages prosocial behaviour. So, more than the material comforts, it is the psychological succour of stable value-system and emotionally-available care-givers that an adolescent requires, to sustain through the journey of maturation.

### **5 b. i. Storyline of *The Book Thief***

In 1943, at the peak of World War II, nine-year-old Liesel Meminger accompanies her mother, along with her younger brother Werner on a train journey to Molching, Germany, to reach their new foster home. Because of her political affiliations, the mother, fearing persecution, has decided to give the children up. On the way, the ailing Werner dies, and is buried on a wayside graveyard. The traumatized sister finds a handbook—a manual for gravedigging—on the spot, and steals it as an anchor for her last moments with her dead brother. At Molching, the mother hands over the child to Rosa and Hans Hubermann—the foster parents, and leaves forever. The loss and abandonment take a toll on the nine-year old Liesel, and she suffers from psychosomatic symptoms of trauma like nightmares, bed-wetting, and re-living of the death-scene of her brother. Rosa Hubermann is a strict foster parent, hardened by poverty. Hans Hubermann is a kind person with a business of painting and a flair for playing accordion. Both play their respective roles in giving Liesel the environment to sustain herself. Rosa scrutinises over food and cleanliness alongside training the girl in psychomotor skills through household chores. Hans, with his deep empathy, sits through the episodes of Liesel's nightmares at midnight, and reads the *Gravedigger's Handbook* to the child. Eventually, he teaches her to read, and keeps on buying books for Liesel whenever she could scrape out spare money from his allowances. He even encourages Liesel to salvage books from the Nazi bonfires. Outside the foster family, Liesel draws sustenance from the unwavering friendship of Rudy Steiner, a young boy from the neighbourhood. Also, she comes to befriend

the mayor's wife, Ilsa Hermann, and gains access to their library to continue with her love of reading. Liesel's friendship with a runaway Jew—Max Vandenburg, whom the Hubermann family shelters from Nazi persecution, exposes her to the facts of suffering and bigotry prevalent in the world outside. Also, she becomes an able fellow-conspirator, helping her parents keep the presence of Max hidden. Soon, the war reaches Molching and Max flees the Hubermann household. He is eventually captured and is sent to the concentration camp. Liesel has a harrowing experience of witnessing Jewish prisoners being marched to Dachau, during which, she commits an act of great courage by trying to feed them. When bombings begin in Molching, Liesel proves her mettle by soothing the scared people in the bunkers with her reading. Soon, an overnight bombing razes Molching to the ground, and Liesel loses her entire foster family and Rudy to it. The mayor and his wife give succour to Liesel in this difficult moment, and help her rebuild her life. With Ilsa's encouragement, Liesel writes her narrative, commemorating Rosa, Hans and Rudy. She rediscovers her love for words—and makes a meaning of her lived existence through stories. The closing chapters show Liesel as an adult contemplating her life and her losses. The first-person omniscient narrator of the novel, Death, concludes the narration by revisiting Liesel's life to show her story's influence. The novel ends with an emphasis on the capacity of stories shape human existence, and the endurance of human connections to tide over the travails of life.

#### **5 b ii. Causes of trauma—incongruencies in the holding environment and their impacts**

Death of her brother and abandonment by her mother caused Liesel to go into a traumatic state of mind. Additionally, the tight economic condition of the household often made Liesel a recipient of harsh behaviour of her foster parent, Rosa. The chaotic events unfolding in Nazi Germany, like the burning of books, the parading and torture of fellow human beings of a particular religion, and eventually, the bombings—all continues to add up to the trauma-beset adolescence of Liesel. The impact of separation from loved ones is seen in nightmares;

reliving the traumatic moment of Werner's death; bed-wetting; unwillingness to participate in school activities or studies; and, dissociation of the thinking self from physical pain (when Rosa beats her for spending the earned money to post letters to her mother). All these are symptoms of internalization and depression. Later, in school, she shows symptoms of externalization as well, when she beats up two of her classmates—Ludwig Schmeickl and Tommy Muller, when they subject her to ridicule, and she breaks down soon after, mourning the loss of her brother. All these are indicative of emotion-focussed response to stress. She continues with her extremely emotion-focussed response even further, when Ilsa Hermann refuses to continue hiring Rosa's services, and in response, Liesel lashes out at her with harsh words. Also, when she comes across the Nazi propaganda in *Mein Kampf*, she feels a hatred welling up in her against the written words, and tears up the book. All these indicate her struggle to come to terms with her emotional excesses, when faced with aggravating situations or painful memories.

### **5 b iii. Adjustments in Holding environment for Trauma Recovery; evidences of recovery**

The single major contributor to the process of trauma recovery of the nine-year old Liesel is Hans Hubermann—his compassionate parenting style. With his empathetic behaviour and his sustained efforts of being available in moments of emotional turmoil, he earns the trust of the traumatized child. In order to resuscitate the child's damaged sense of self—devastated by death and abandonment, Hans lavishes her with attention, music and preciously-managed gifts. He reads the *Gravedigger's Handbook* to Liesel, and eventually, teaches her to read. This helps Liesel build up foundations of her new reality, with the anchors of the transitional object—the stolen handbook. In case of Rosa Hubermann, the concept of good enough mothering applies, as she attempts to prepare the child for adolescent life in a non-indulgent manner. She is keenly observant of Liesel's nutrition and physical upkeep. At the same time, she makes sure that Liesel participates in the household chores by delivering the laundered

clothes to the clients and collecting money thereof. Good-enough care-giving is also shown by Hans, when, in the Chapter “The Shoulder Shrug”, he presents Liesel with the hard fact of Hitler’s culpability in her family’s tragic predicament. Also, Hans does not hesitate to slap Liesel when the latter gives vehement reactions against Hitler on hearing this news. This shows that Hans is neither afraid of presenting the truth, nor taking extreme measures to protect his ward. This teaches Liesel how to transact the external realities with her value system—that she may express her opinions within the safe confines of her home, but must hold peace when outside, in order to avoid persecution. Another facilitative factor in the holding environment of the Hubermann household is the value-integrity observed in the foster parents. Both Hans and Rosa share a relationship of faith, love and respect, even though Rosa makes an apparent show of berating her husband. The child understands that the verbal violence is a show, and there is a deep connection between the parents. This becomes apparent in Rosa’s indulgent rebukes (when Hans spends money on Liesel’s books) and in her holding on to Hans’s accordion (when he is out of town). This gives a sense a protection, as the child rests assured that the parental figures will endure through the external vicissitudes of Nazi excesses. Also, Liesel is much impressed by the steadfast support given by Rosa in Hans’s daring anti-Nazi endeavours. Without her, Hans would not have succeeded in sheltering Max—a Jew running from Nazi persecution--in the strained economic conditions of the family. Value-consistency is shown by Rosa, when she apologizes to Liesel for punishing her without knowing the complete facts of her spending the errand money. This instance gives Liesel the grounding that she can return back to this secure base of foster parents, whenever she faces emotional turbulence. She becomes securely attached, ready to undertake actions which she believes to be morally correct (e. g. salvaging books from being burned; providing food to the paraded Jews; keeping the stay of Max a secret from all of her friends). Another positive influence on her holding environment is her friendship with Rudy Steiner and Max. Rudy is her classmate, who stays by her side

through every adventure and exploration. This promotes psychomotor engagements and social skills in Liesel. Her friendship with Max helps her develop problem-focussed approach to situations, as the latter inspires Liesel to write and read stories to make sense of the incongruities of life. Both these experiences encourage Liesel to dare make entry into the mayor's household, seek the attention of Ilsa Hermann and gain access to her library. The formative influences of Hans, Rosa, Rudy, Max and Ilsa cumulatively promote a sense of self-determination and pro-social behaviour in Liesel, which is evident in her improved handling of stressful situations. During the Molching air-raids, she not only sustains herself through the crisis, but also brings comfort to others in the bunker through her reading sessions. This trait is carried forth later on, and Liesel continues with her endeavour of writing stories, which, as per the narration of the omniscient narrator (Death) manage to touch a lot of people's lives.

#### **5 b iv. Factors in Liesel's environment that provide a secure base for her**

To sum up, thus, the following adjustments in the holding environment contribute to the formation of secure base for trauma recovery:

- i. Compassionate parenting; empathetic care-giving
- ii. Value-integrity among the care-givers
- iii. Availability of positive peer communication
- iv. Transitional object (Gravedigger's Handbook; The Wordshaker--given by Max) used as an anchor for literacy.
- v. Self-determination and self-assuredness in negotiating with the external world, brought forth by the good-enough mothering of the Hubermann couple.

#### **6. Observations**

Studying the interventions in the holding environments of both the protagonists—Kambili and Liesel, it can be observed that the following elements are common in both the cases of trauma recovery and adolescent maturation:

- i. Close connection with a caregiver, who provides emotional sustenance through compassionate caregiving, especially during emotionally-vulnerable moments. It helps resuscitate the damaged sense of self, and inculcate purposefulness in the traumatized adolescents in question.
- ii. presence of transitional objects to tide over the grief of estrangement from the attached person.
- iii. Promotion of resourcefulness and self-determination through “good-enough” mothering, like participation in household chores and management of family resources.
- iv. Value-integrity, promoted through upholding of moral ideals; through consistency in thought and action; and, through a spirit of dialogism among the family members;
- v. scaffolding and monitoring by vigilant parents. Comfortable living; access to power and money to fend off the exigencies of external environment like war or political tensions are desirable factors to make a kid feel safe, but they are not mandatory. The non-negotiable elements in the holding environment, therefore, solely focus on the elements that provide psychological succour to the child, to explore the life-events and relationships with a safety-catch. Together, they promote self-determination, prosocial behaviour and problem-focussed approach to problems in life.

## **Conclusion**

From the comparative analysis of the journey of two protagonists—Kambili and Liesel, from trauma recovery to maturation, it can be stated that despite the differences in material conditions—availability of affluence or otherwise—children are impacted by their immediate environment like family, relationship between the care-givers/parents, availability of nutrition and safety, etc. Protection from the exigencies of external environment and maintenance of the physical existence does impact the felt sense of security by the child. However, they cannot come in exchange of psychological sustenance afforded through the realisation of secure base.

Compassionate parenting, good-enough mothering, integrity in value system, promotion of self-determination and self-esteem, availability of empathetic role-models, peers and transitional objects appear to be common for trauma recovery for both the protagonists, and hence, prove themselves to be the non-negotiable elements in the holding environment of a child for healthy maturation into an adolescent.

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