

Fact-Fiction Interface: Revisiting the Holocaust Memory, Trauma and Violence in *The Librarian of Auschwitz*

Saurav Shandil

Research Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Himachal Pradesh

Abstract: This paper critically engages with the fact-fiction interface as represented in the novel *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, written originally in Spanish by Antonio Iturbe and translated into English by Lilit Zilkin Thwaites. It is based on the real-life story of Dita Kraus, the librarian of Auschwitz, presented fictionally. At a very young age, Dita, along with her family, was transported to Terezin Ghetto and later to Auschwitz concentration camp at Birkenau, operated by German Nazis and the SS during World War II. During her confinement in the camp, she was responsible for taking care of “eight books”, which her fellow inmates managed to smuggle inside the “children’s block 31” in the camp. While performing her duties as the youngest librarian, Dita witnessed deaths of her close kith and kin including her father and a fellow inmate Fredy Hirsch, whom she admired for his courage. The death of her father traumatised her to an extent that rather than mourning, she grows infuriated and wants to kill the Nazi soldiers. *The Delayed Life*, a memoir by Dita Kraus, demonstrates how “[trauma] attests to its endless impact on a life,” as Cathy Caruth has stated (7). The novel, on the one hand, deals with perturbing facts through suffering Jews; on the other, it tells the “story born from . . . the rich imagination of author.” Thus, the paper focuses on how Dita revisited memories of her hauntingly perturbing past and examines its fictionalisation by Antonio Iturbe (*Dita Kraus Librarian of Auschwitz* par. 3). It will also examine memory and violence as leitmotifs based on textual analysis of the novel.

Keywords: Facts, Fictionalisation, Revisiting, Trauma, Violence, Memory, Holocaust

In recent years, we have witnessed a recourse to fictionalising facts or real events in many novels. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Angie Thomas, and John Green blur reality with fiction so that everyday reality becomes nothing but a fictional representation. The relationship between facts and

fiction is quite complicated, and sometimes, they are not evident and may require a close reading of a text. For example, Salman Rushdie, in his novels, primarily uses this technique of adapting reality as fiction, which may require a close textual analysis so that a reader is able to decode what elements of reality lie therein a text. ‘Facts’ are real events, people and sometimes situations, whereas ‘fiction’ brings forth imaginary characters, imagined situations and events. In many instances, writers use these facts and real incidents to devise a work of fiction to point out certain harsh realities of the world we live in. “On a technical level, fiction writers must contend with the difference between realism and verisimilitude, or the quality of appearing to be true” (Penelope). It is right to say that fiction writing partially relies on borrowing from reality. Therefore, it is suitable to state that reality supplements a text’s writing during fictionalisation.

Kai Mikkonen has argued on the transition of fiction to facts, “. . .modern sociology of literature or historiography may use the realistic novels of Balzac and Zola, despite their fictional status, as exemplary descriptions of actual nineteenth-century life. Thus, as the world changes, fiction obtains new, real reference” (294). It is, therefore evident that not only can facts be significantly remodelled as fiction, but the process can happen vice-versa. Fiction may attain the status of reality, as is evident in many instances. Trauma literature, which appropriates the sufferings of the victims, depends on the very act of fictionalisation. “Literary texts and their fictional worlds allow for nuanced engagements with the subject of trauma which is often personalised and contextualised, fictionalised and historicised, as well as psychologised and metaphorized at the same time” (Schönfelder 23). With these nuanced engagements, writers make their readers associate with the sufferings of others to achieve catharsis.

In the novel *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, Antonio Iturbe uses this narrative technique of mixing facts and fiction, a postmodernist approach, in order to represent the trauma and suffering of Dita Kraus in the novel. Her lived experiences in the Auschwitz concentration camp have been recorded in the form of a fictional account while borrowing real incidents of her life. The authentic

names of people and places have been used to lend credence to the fact that the novel is the portrayal of Dita's suffering and the trauma she underwent in the concentration camp.

The word trauma originated in the 17th century from the Greek word 'traumaticus', which signifies a wound. 'Trauma' is defined by *Cambridge Online Dictionary* as "severe and lasting emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience, or a case of such shock happening." Trauma, therefore, can be defined as an emotional response to distress, which in many cases, leads to the altered mental state of a person. *Online Etymology Dictionary* gives the roots of the word trauma from "1690s, [meaning] "physical wound," medical Latin, from Greek trauma [means] "a wound, a hurt; [or] a defeat," sense of "psychic wound, an unpleasant experience which causes abnormal stress" is from 1894." Mental trauma has a lasting impact on a person than physical trauma. Even physical trauma, in many cases, results in mental trauma, which affects the psychological make-up of an individual and, in certain situations, leads to MMDs, PTSDs or complex PTSDs. Many theorists, such as Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth and Roger Luckhurst, have explored this field and provided remarkable insights.

Cathy Caruth is a noted trauma theorist who has explored several facets of trauma and trauma studies in literature. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she defines trauma as:

As the repeated infliction of a wound, the act of Tancred calls up the ordinary meaning of trauma itself (in both English and German), the Greek trauma, or "wound," originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body. In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. (3)

Cathy Caruth's observation based on the understanding of Freud's theory states that trauma is not just physical but rather mental, which has a lasting impact on the psyche of a person. Sigmund Freud was the first person to take a plunge into the field of trauma studies, but he soon discontinued his venture. He believed that hysteria is related to trauma, which is reflected in his theories of seduction in

childhood, but later changed his views and further developed the idea of “Oedipal Complex”. His theoretical postulations referred to the fact that any sexual encounter which is forced leads to the development of traumatic memories. In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud states:

We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure.

(23)

According to Freud, trauma has the capacity to break the protective shield, which then further affects the mental ability and the defence mechanism of an individual going through traumatic neurosis. He states that the mental apparatus, after experiencing trauma, gets flooded with overwhelming responses, which thus affects the responses to the stimuli received by the mind, a condition called hysteria. Hysteria, as stated by Freud, is a mental condition which occurs in a person because of repressed desires and emotions or because of specific traumatic experiences. It impacts the overall psychological makeup of a person and can lead to certain chronic diseases which require critical medical attention.

Trauma studies have become a significant field in literary studies with the rise of trauma theories and genres such as trauma novels. In trauma theories, the central concern is the aftermath of trauma, which thus tries to explore the events post-trauma and its effects on an individual. In the case of traumatic neurosis, the repetitive memories work back and forth, which brings out the past painful/stressful events. It is related to remembering a traumatic event, which is stored in the memory of an individual. Thus, memory plays a significant role in harking back an individual to those traumatic events.

Memory shares a close relationship with trauma, as memory is the container of information and previous experiences. This relationship between memory and trauma was first studied by Perrie Janet in 1889. Traumatic experiences get stored in our memory, and at certain intervals, they are reflected via subconscious or unconscious actions. 'Memory' is defined as "the store of things learned and retained from an organism's activity or experience as evidenced by modification of structure or behaviour or by recall and recognition" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Traumatic memories are associated with terrible events that a person has experienced or observed. Exposure to trauma in childhood or any stage of life leads to the development of traumatic memories, which then emerge in the form of emotions, anger and depression. Ernest G. Schachtel expounds that memory "...as a function of the living personality can be understood only as a capacity for the organisation[s] and reconstruction[s] of past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears, and interests" (3).

Violence is yet another aspect which is usually associated with trauma and trauma studies. Sometimes violent experiences are the major factors leading an individual to trauma such as abuse, assault and rapes. It is a common phenomenon which occurs on a daily basis and many violent acts get reported every day. Whereas in many cases, the violence is not physical but psychological as well which severely affects a person's mental health. The origin of the term 'violence' has Latin roots, from the term 'volentia' which means vehemence. Later, it was anglicised as violence which means the use of physical force in order to do harm or some sort of damage and also relates with violation. Sometimes, trauma ramifies itself as violence and more often it is violence that results in trauma and traumatic memories. The terms such as 'trauma', 'memory' and 'violence' are reciprocally related to each other as is discussed above all three play a significant role in trauma studies and trauma theories.

The novel *The Librarian of Auschwitz* is a real-life story of Dita Kraus, a fourteen-year-old librarian in the Auschwitz Birkenau Camp. The novel limns Dita's life story and how she ends up with her family at the concentration camp. She has been handed over the responsibility to take care

of eight books by Freddy Hirsch that has been smuggled into the camp by some inmates. The novel opens up with the remarks:

The Nazi officers are dressed in black. They look at death with the indifference of a gravedigger. In Auschwitz, human life has so little value that no one is shot anymore; a bullet is more valuable than a human being. In Auschwitz, there are communal chambers where they administer Zyklon gas. It's cost-effective, killing hundreds of people with just one tank.

(1)

In concentration camps, killing people was an everyday task where hundreds of people were killed together, especially Jews, because they were thought to be “unworthy of life” (Holocaust Encyclopaedia). Dita and her family get transported to the concentration camp on 18th December 1943 when she is fourteen years old. Before her transportation to the camp, Dita, though unable to recall the date, said it was March 15, 1939, when “her childhood ended forever” (10). Dita’s childhood ends when she witnesses the army trucks moving in the streets of Prague. According to her, it was the time when her life underwent a change in all respects. “By 1940 Nazi Germany had assigned the Gestapo to turn Terezín into a Jewish ghetto and concentration camp. It held primarily Jews from Czechoslovakia. . .” (History of Terezin).

A few limitations were put on the populace after the entrance of Nazi forces in Prague, mostly on those who were of the Jewish origin. But with time, these limitations became more severe, and they were compelled to give up their property rights. When the Germans moved Dita along with her family to the camp, the first lesson that she learned in the camp was how to survive. The new inmates are instilled with the lesson on their ultimate task of survival in the camp, how to survive longer by surviving for a few hours. Multifarious killings take place in a single day, and it becomes difficult for the guards to handle the dead bodies. Violence is a quotidian drill in the camp; those who do not follow the orders get thrashed by the Kapos (guards). The violence perpetrated is not only physical but mental and psychological as well. The Kapos constantly remind the inmates who are in-charge and set up precedents to follow. The atmosphere of constant fear is created by the guards in order to

maintain their authority and feeding the minds of the prisoners that any act of rebellion will lead to death.

Also, the food offered to the inmates is the bare minimum for their survival. The food offered in the camp consisted of coffee in the morning, a bowl of soup at noon, and a loaf of bread as supper, which could not satiate the hunger of inmates. “Dita eats her turnip soup very slowly- they say it fills you more that way-but sipping it barely takes her mind off her hunger” (29). It is undoubtedly true that insufficient food was provided to ensure their survival only for draconian labour, was also one of the reasons of deaths inside Auschwitz. Perpetual inanition, adds up in the battle of survival and affects the protagonist and her fellow inmates psychologically and physically. Dehumanisation and stripping of the captives from their identities is the tradition of the camp.

After her arrival at the camp, Dita discovers that “. . . in Auschwitz everybody deceives everyone else” (89). People in the camp turn against each other for food, survival and personal interests. Regular inspections and detaining of the prisoners are frequent, and if found guilty, severe punishments, which included starving and appalling beatings by the guards. The novel successfully portrays the fact that how Jews were looked down and treated as lesser beings. In the camp, “A thief, a swindler, a murderess . . . anyone of these is more valuable than a Jew” (179). This demonstrates unequivocally, how antisemitic the German Nazi troops were in their approach.

Dita both in her real life and in the novel was given charge to take care of eight books which according to Iturbe were brought secretly inside the Camp BIIb to teach the Children’s in the Block. These books include *A Short History of World* by HG Wells, *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas and *The Adventures of the Good Solider Syjek* by Jaroslav Hasek. While hiding the books from the Kapos was itself a challenge, the other challenge that it brought was the constant fear of getting caught. The novel constantly highlights the importance of books and the transformation they can bring about. “Books are extremely dangerous; they make people think” (4). But when asked in an interview that did books help Dita in surviving Auschwitz, to which she replied: “Certainly not.

They were a small section of my life in Auschwitz. A very short time. The whole thing was three-four months that I was the librarian. The books certainly didn't save my life" (The Librarian of Auschwitz *YouTube*). She also stated that in order to come up with the book Iturbe had to bring in imaginary elements which never existed in reality.

Watching hundreds of people die every day in Auschwitz is a common event, even the records of deaths are kept by the registrar, appointed by the superiors of the camp. The inmates in the camp have been reduced to mere numbers. When they reached the camp, they were inscribed with a number as Dita Kraus mentions in her memoir *A Delayed Life*, "With fresh ink I received the next digits, 73,305 in all" (136). Once the prisoners arrived at the camp, they became aware of the reality of the camps set up by German forces and witnessed the horrors inflicted on the people who lived there. Whippings, electric shocks, and injections are just a few of the torture techniques used in these camps. Additionally, at times the guards would fake executions to heighten the fear of death amongst the prisoners. "In the private sphere, psychological violence includes threatening conduct which lacks physical violence or verbal elements. . ." ("Psychological Violence"), which is clearly evident in this case.

After a few days in the camp Dita's father becomes severely ill because of the horrendous living conditions in the camp. He battles pneumonia while his body is malnourished, because the food provided is inadequate to back up the immune system of the inmates to fight diseases. It was not just the gassing that killed people but many prisoners perished in the camp because of the ailments they caught as a result of poor living conditions in the camps. Dita's father also became the victim of these dire living circumstances. Her father's death perturbs her to an extent that she becomes infuriated and wants to kill the Nazi soldiers. When her mother informs her about the death of her father, she says, "At least your father didn't suffer" (181). Dita on the other hand is astonished on her mother view, because according to her Hans suffered a lot in the camp on which she states, "They took away his world, his house, his dignity, his health . . . and finally, they let him die alone, like a dog, on a flea-

infested pallet. Isn't that enough suffering?" (181). Because of the anguish caused by her father's death, Dita yells at her mother while laying out his pain.

"[Anger] may be most often seen in cases of trauma that involve exploitation or violence" ("Anger and Trauma"). When Dita meets Professor Morgenstern, she tries to inform him about Hans' death but she gets enraged at the Nazis and shouts, "Murderers!" (181). She tells him that she'll get a gun and kill the Nazi soldiers as a result of her traumatic loss. "Traumatic loss refers to the loss of loved ones in the context of potentially traumatising circumstances" (Boelen et al). Such traumatic losses may occur in the form of accidents, massacres, murders and natural calamities. In order to alleviate Dita's suffering Morgenstern tells her, "Our hatred is a victory for them" (184). Even after living in trials and tribulations he suggests that they should not become inhuman. He comforts her by telling her that at least Hans will no longer tolerate the violence and suffering of the miserable life of the camp.

At this juncture, Dita harks back to the memories of the past when she was happy with her family. This recourse to bygone days eases the pain and suffering to a great degree which has been brought about by the confinement in the camp. Dita recalls the time when she and her family were free and lived respectably. In many cases the pleasant memories from the past proffer deep down reassurance to cope up with the sufferings. Same is the case with Dita she finds refuge in the pleasant memories of past to cope up with the pain and trauma of her father's death as well as her gut-wrenching life as an inmate in the camp.

The second incident that traumatised her is the death of Freddy Hirsch. Most of the inmates believe that he committed suicide because he was queer. Dita admired Hirsch for his courage and it is the reason that she is unable to believe that Hirsch committed suicide. She looks into the matter and finds that he is murdered as he was the leader of the resistance in the camp. Hirsch is killed before the uprising he planned with the members of resistance to save the children from September transport from being gassed. After the incident Dita and her mother Lisel with all other inmates in the hut starts hallucinating as a result of the trauma when they watched how people have been loaded in the trucks

in order to be killed. They think they are hearing some music because to the sounds of trucks and metals clanking. "...[A]uditory and verbal hallucinations are the most commonly reported type of hallucination..." (Quidé). Dita and other detainees are in a similar situation and hallucinate at the same time.

The novelist has tried to unravel the suffering caused in the concentration camps powerfully, and in order to come up with the novel Antonio Iturbe interviewed the real-life librarian of Auschwitz Dita Kraus. Iturbe first contacted Dita, to which she responded because of the intriguing questions he asked her. In order to answer those questions Dita must have revisited the memories of her wretched past. For months Iturbe asked Dita about her life in the Auschwitz. He also paid her a visit in Terezin and went to the camp with her where along with her, he also revisited the trauma that Dita and other inmates had to endure for years. The visits inspired Iturbe to write the book on the suffering that Dita underwent. The revisiting is done not just by Dita herself who in order to tell her tale of sufferings to Iturbe went back to her disturbing past but later Iturbe himself revisited the sufferings of Dita and other prisoners inside the camp. He collected facts from different places and then fictionalised them to reveal the horrors committed to the Jews in the concentration camps.

Summing up, it is visible that the novelist with his imaginative genius has successfully fictionalised the life of the librarian of Auschwitz and the leitmotifs such as memory violence and trauma are the key facets of the novel. Iturbe through the novel has unravelled the one of the biggest crimes committed in the period of World War II. The novel revisits the life led by Dita Kraus in Auschwitz along with other crucial aspects of her life and also highlights her courage and resilience which makes her survive the brutality committed in the camps. It is only through this courage she came out alive from the camp and summed up her life in a memoir titled *A Delayed Life* (2020).

Works Cited and Consulted

“Anger and Trauma.” *U S Department of Veteran Affairs*.

www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/anger.asp#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20anger%20can,control%20his%20or%20her%20emotions. Accessed 28 Aug. 2023.

Boelen, Paul A, et al. “Traumatic loss: Mental health consequences and implications for treatment and prevention.” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, vol. 10,1 1591331. 15 Apr. 2019. *NCBI*, doi:10.1080/20008198.2019.1591331. Accessed 04 Sep. 2023.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. John Hopkins UP, 1996.

Ernest G. Schachtel. “On Memory and Childhood Amnesia.” *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, vol.10, no.1, 1947, pp.1-26. *Taylor and Francis*, DOI: 10.1080/00332747.1947.11022620. Accessed 04 Sep. 2023.

Frued, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey, W.W. Norton, 1961.

“Gassing Operations.” *Holocaust Museum*, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/gassing-operations. Accessed 24 August 2023.

“History of Terezin.” *Terezin.org*, www.terezin.org/the-history-of-terezin. Accessed 27 Aug 2023.

Iturbe, Antonio. *The Librarian of Auschwitz*. Trans. Lilit Zekulin Thwaites, Penguin, 2017.

Kraus, Dita. *A Delayed Life*. Penguin, 2020.

“Memory.” *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trauma. Accessed 10 Aug. 2023.

Mikkonen, Kai. “Can Fiction Become Fact? The Fiction-to-Fact Transition in Recent Theories of Fiction.” *Style*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2006, pp. 291–312. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.40.4.291. Accessed 10 Aug. 2023.

Penelope, Lesley. “Writers and Liars: On Fact Fiction and Truth.” *Lithub*, 12 August 2022, www.lithub.com/writers-and-liars-on-fact-fiction-and-truth/. Accessed 10 August 2023.

“Psychological Violence.” *Council of Europe*, www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/psychological-violence. Accessed 27 Aug. 2023.

Quidé, Yann. “Dissociation, Trauma and the Experience of Visual Hallucinations in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Schizophrenia.” *BJPsych Open*. vol. 9, no. 1, 2023. *NCBI*, doi:10.1192/bjo.2023.3. Accessed 02 Sep. 2023.

Schönfelder, Christa. “Theorising Trauma: Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds.” *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction*. Transcript Verlag, 2013, pp. 27–86. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxrhq.5. Accessed 23 Aug. 2023.

“The Librarian of Auschwitz speaks about her Delayed Life-Dita Kraus.” *Youtube*, Uploaded by Helping Hand Coalition-Global Forum, 21 Apr. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioMNGIfS-20. Accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

“Trauma.” *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/trauma>. Accessed 10 Aug. 2023.

“Trauma.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*. www.etymonline.com/word/trauma. Accessed: 24 Aug. 2023.