

Exploring the Complexities of Childhood Adversity in Judith Kerr's Trilogy

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Abstract:

What do you often remember while contemplating 'childhood'? Pursuing butterflies, navigating paper boats, roaming meadows and playgrounds while revelling in trivial secrets, engaging in petty disputes with friends, siblings, and parents, followed by a yearning for reconciliation, alongside anxieties regarding examination results and apprehensions about school report cards—this enumeration encapsulates the myriad experiences we encountered during our formative years. Childhood is frequently perceived as a period of innocence and untroubled happiness. Nonetheless, not all hues in the palette of infancy are radiant, luminous, and brilliant; there exist some sombre, muted, mottled, and dreary tones as well. Many individuals face a complicated array of obstacles and struggles that influence their formative years. Renowned British author and illustrator Judith Kerr examines the intricacies of childhood challenges in her trilogy, which includes "When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit" (1971), "Bombs on Aunt Dainty" (1975), and "A Small Person Far Away" (1978). This paper examines these struggles in relation to the trilogy.

Keywords: Childhood, Children's Literature, Judith Kerr, Refugee, struggles.

Introduction:

Celebrating the joy of ordinary as well as extraordinary life, warmth and humanity in her works, Judith Kerr is a unique voice in British children's literature, creating timeless, exquisitely illustrated picture books for kids. Born on June 14, 1923 in Berlin, Germany, in a Jewish family, Kerr's Life Journey was marked by extraordinary experiences that influenced her artistic endeavours. To escape Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews, the family was forced to go into exile, first in Switzerland in 1928, then to Paris in 1930 and finally to England in 1936. From their aristocratic and cosy life in Berlin, young Judith Kerr had to adapt to a very stressful lifestyle struggling to meet both ends. Homeless, Jobless, penniless and to worsen the fear, languageless, the Kerr family had to face stumbling blocks in every new country they dwelt. Following the unstable, unsettled and peripatetic life due to the Nazi Propaganda and World War II, Young Kerr had to go to 11 different schools in

Germany, Switzerland, France and England. Kerr finally settled in Britain in 1936, where she lived for the remainder of her life. Kerr, best known for her beloved children's Books "The Tiger Who Came to Tea " and Mog Series, draws upon her own experiences as a refugee and survivor of World War II, offering a poignant exploration of resilience, identity, and the indomitable spirit of childhood. This Paper deals with Kerr's childhood battles and endeavours for survival.

Discussion:

Being a refugee and World War II survivor, the well favoured and beloved Children's Writer Judith Kerr's childhood was not an easy one. Her three autobiographical novels; *When Hitler stole Pink Rabbit* (1971), *Bombs on Aunt Dainty* (1975) and *A Small Person Far Away* (1978) are based on her early wandering years (which against all the odds she greatly enjoyed), her adolescence in London during the war, and finally on a brief return to Berlin as a young married woman. Comprising evocative fictionalised memoirs of her wartime youth, these poignant accounts depict her shifts across Europe as a German refugee child. They seamlessly combine and detail her uphill battle, unpalatable yet exciting experiences during those tender and sensitive juvenile years. Collected as '*The Out of Hitler Time Trilogy*', these books form a crucial outlook through a child's eye to the horrors and sufferings of war.

The first part in Kerr's trilogy, "*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*," paints a vivid picture of a Jew family forced to flee their home in Germany as the Nazis rise to power. The protagonist, Anna Kemper, grapples with the abrupt loss of her familiar surroundings and the unsettling realisation that her identity is now tied to being a refugee. Kerr skilfully captures the emotional turmoil of displacement, emphasising the challenges of maintaining a sense of self in the face of adversity. This semi-autobiographical account sensitively depicts what it really feels to be suddenly poor, to live in strange countries, go to strange schools, and learn strange languages.

For a little girl who is hardly nine years old without her close ones around, the whole world becomes strange and unusual. Though her parents do not directly speak to her about the ranting and raving Nazism in Germany, little Anna has to face numerous oddities that stir her life. The 'Pink Rabbit' in the title refers to Anna's beloved toy and symbolises innocence, normalcy and sense of belonging in childhood that is stripped away from her.

The theme of identity and the search for a sense of home is central to the novel. "*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* " which despite its historical context of tumultuous events of the 1930s in Germany, remains relevant today across the world, serving as a powerful reminder of the impact of war on families and the strength of the human

spirit. Kerr's alter ego and the protagonist of the novel 'Anna Kemper' a young Jewish girl, living a happy, playful life with her beloved family in her hometown Grunewald, suddenly comes to know that they are on shaky grounds in Hitler's Germany as her father is a brilliant German writer, an outspoken critic and a blacklisted opponent of Nazi Party. Against the ominous backdrop of Nazi Germany, the family is then forced to flee their homeland as Hitler rises to power. Finding their way to life, the family not only struggles with the physical displacement but also with the quest for identity and belonging. Anna and her elder brother Max are allowed to carry only a little of their belongings on this Journey. Anna is on fence whether she should take her favourite toy Pink Rabbit that has been there with her since her early childhood or the newly gifted woolly dog. It's painful to abandon many things that have been part and parcel of her life. Though she leaves behind her favourite Pink Rabbit home before setting off to Switzerland, Anna believes that one day she would be back home and would live a normal life with all her usual routine. But it is not to happen and there begins Anna's search for her home...quest for identity...longing for cosy childhood...craving for naive needs. Kerr poignantly depicts Anna's anxiety and concerns about the difficult childhood of Famous people. Anna's thoughts during the perilous train journey to Switzerland delineate her naive worries about her present and future as she says "All the famous people had had an awful time....They had all had what was called a difficult childhood. Clearly you had to have one if you wanted to become famous." (p.40.)

Switzerland, that's a paradise for the rest of the world, doesn't seem to help Anna's parents settle down to a peaceful life. They continue to struggle to meet their both ends and provide the basic necessities to their children. Turning down from the sophisticated urban lifestyle of Berliners to the rural set up of Swiss countryside, Anna encounters many cultural shocks, adapts a new Swiss-German dialect, makes new friends and tries to mellow over time. But deep within her heart the roots of the longing for her home in Grunewald make Anna sentimental. Meeting a family friend 'Onkel Julius' across the borders makes her feel that she is seeing her home again. "It was Onkel Julius. It was wonderful and yet somehow confusing to see him, as though a bit of their house in Berlin had suddenly appeared by the edge of the lake." (p.71.) Anna comes to know all their property and belongings including her favourite 'Pink Rabbit' have been confiscated by Hitler's Nazi army. Calling "The Stolen Pink Rabbit" to all the goodbyes Anna has to bid to her safe, secured, happy and exuberant childhood, Kerr has sentimentally metaphorized the innocent longing for our beloved ones.

While Anna thinks that they are getting settled down in Switzerland, her parents plan to move to Paris in order to have better chances of earning and dwelling. This adds to Anna's and Max's worries as they find their German ambience that was blending down into Swiss surroundings is now fusing towards a new French world. Back to square one, learning French and compromising Paris life, Anna now has a tough row to hoe. Although Anna's parents try to keep their children away from blazing tensions and pressures of Jew persecution, the distress gradually flows down and affects the children's life. The untimely responsibilities, the pressure of being a patronised refugee, the financial struggles, the fear of isolation and alienation entirely disturbs Anna and Max's childhood normalcy. Kerr touchingly points out the high pressure of being extra sincere Jew refugees through Anna's father's warning to the children, "We have to be more hard working than other people, " said Papa, to prove that we are not lazy, more generous to prove that we are not mean, more polite to prove that we are not rude. (p.122.)

Deprived of their simple and basic demands of childhood, Anna and Max long to get back to the routine life they once lived. Anna would love to have a Birthday Party with her friends, play with them, go to school and read and write like the other children. Kerr mentions Anna's longing for normalcy touchingly. "She suddenly realised how long it was since she had really played with other children. It was lovely to be back at school (p.182)."

Kerr also vividly portrays Anna's struggle to learn a new language. She has to go banging head on the wall learning every single word in French. "It was sickening stuff to be turning out when there were so many interesting things she could have written about if only she had been able to write in German." (p.156.) The scars of this bout do remain on the backdrop of time as Anna dreams the throbbing nightmares about a dog. "Ninety-Seven! She cried, but still Pumpel kept coming and suddenly she realised that since they were in Paris, of course he would expect her to count in French. What was the French for ninety- seven? Her mind was blank,..Quatre-vingts dix sept...she shouted triumphantly." (p.173). Anna and Max run an extra mile to learn French and to cope up with their academics. Their efforts are not in vain as they both not only miraculously learn French but also perform outstandingly in their school. However, fate has another proposal for them as their parents, disappointed with the financial burdens in Paris, look forward to moving to England with a hope of a better life. Life is not easy but Kerr optimistically makes the readers find the power of hope and positivity as Anna is ready for any journey as long as she is with her family. "I don't really mind where we are', she said 'as long as we're all together." (p.146.) Joan Leung in her Book Review praises Kerr's recounts

of wartime children's experiences as more visceral than intellectual as she has been more impulsive in depicting them.

In the second Part of the trilogy, *"Bombs on Aunt Dainty,"* the Kemper family lands themselves in war-torn London. Once again the family becomes languageless as the new Language 'English' stands in their way as a barricade. The challenges of daily life during the bombings and the uncertainty of the future weigh heavily on young Anna. She has to depend upon the kind, philanthropic donors and unwillingly accept their charity to cater to her daily needs as well as education. The unfortunate failure of parents to earn for the family can cause a great deal of frustration to themselves and their children as well. Kerr impactfully points out Anna's father's helplessness by calling him a 'A writer without a language'. Both Anna and Max have to shoulder untimely responsibilities as they struggle for their very existence. Anna has to abandon her education and accept a job of a stenographer to help the family meet both ends just at the age of 15. Kerr continues Anna's journey, now set against the backdrop of World War II in England. Shankar Biswas (JOELL,2018), in his article narrates how Anna is traumatised with homesickness during the war period. He says that "A Home is a place to which all children are determined to return". But Anna can't. The struggle intensifies as the war brings with it not only the fear of bombs but also the challenges of adolescence. Anna faces the trials of growing up amidst the chaos, finding her voice as an artist, and grappling with the uncertainty of the future. This episode reflects the resilience of children who must adapt to their circumstances, finding pockets of joy amidst the chaos. However, Anna gradually starts feeling away from the German past that has been violently seized from her. Kerr's portrayal of the Grunewald that's now in Nazi control indicates it as a separate space in which she does not belong to. Anna can see at it from an estranged eye. Joan Leung in her article, calls this journey a roller coaster of teens and twenties between the twin poles of love and death.

Anna and her family survive World War II. They go through the horrors of blitz in London and war torn life. Eventually they are naturalised as British subjects. Although the Holocaust horrors and Hitler hysterias of concentration camps are not much directly discussed in the novels, one can see their dreadful impacts and everlasting scars on the young minds. The toils, turmoil and tumultuous upheavals through which they have made their ways, do leave marks on the time. The past waits around. Memories linger. In her third and final sequel of the trilogy, 'A Small Person Far Away', Kerr skilfully addresses reflection and redemption as she explores the aftermath of war and its lingering impact on Anna's life. As she matures into a young woman, the struggle transforms into a quest for understanding and acceptance of the

past reminiscence. Kerr efficiently examines the process of healing and redemption, emphasising the importance of acknowledging and reconciling with one's past.

The final book, "*A Small Person Far Away*," delves into Anna's adolescence and her struggles with coming to terms with the traumatic events of her childhood. Kerr poignantly explores the lasting impact of war on an individual's psyche, shedding light on the complexities of identity, guilt, and the pursuit of normalcy. The narrative grapples with the challenge of reconciling the past with the present, portraying how childhood struggles can echo through the years. The reminiscences of past life remind Anna that the 'Small person far away' is here not merely distant, but lost forever."

As stated by Judith Kerr's in one of her authorial interviews (Published in the Authorial Note of '*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*', Harper Collins, 2017), without her parents' righteous decisions, she could have been one of the millions of other Jewish children who lost their life in horrible Nazi concentration camps. She can never forget how lucky she has been. Time changes but the past is always present.

Conclusion

While Kerr's trilogy is rooted in her personal experiences as a refugee, it resonates with readers on a universal level. Childhood struggles, whether shaped by war, displacement, or personal adversity, are a common thread that binds individuals across different backgrounds. The resilience of the human spirit, the ability to find hope in the darkest of times, and the enduring power of familial bonds are themes that elevate Kerr's trilogy beyond a mere historical account. These three novels beautifully capture the innocence of childhood juxtaposed against the harsh realities of political turmoil. Kerr masterfully weaves together the personal and historical aspects of the story, allowing readers to connect with the characters on a deeply emotional level and reminding of the shared humanity that binds us all, regardless of the specific circumstances of our upbringing. Anna's thought "I don't really mind where we are, as long as we're all together." keeps echoing in readers' minds, acknowledging the spirit of love, family bonds and resilience.

References:

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