

Unveiling Humanity's Dilemma: A Critical Analysis of Morality and Compassion in John Boyne's "*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*"

R Priskilla Mary¹ & N. S. Vishnu Priya²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore- 632014, India

² Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore- 632014, India

Correspondence: N. S. Vishnu Priya, Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore- 632014, India. E-mail: nsvishnupriya@vit.ac.in

Received: May 30, 2024

Accepted: December 12, 2024

Online Published: January 7, 2025

doi:10.5430/wjel.v15n2p375

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n2p375>

Abstract

Humanity, often defined as the epitome of benevolence within the human race, reflects a profound essence of compassion and empathy towards fellow beings. Echoing Leo Tolstoy's assertion that "The sole meaning of life is to serve Humanity," this paper delves into an exploration of humanity's mere existence within the human race. Amidst the devastating tumult of the two Great World Wars, humanity's essence came under intense scrutiny, particularly during the dark shadows of World War II. At the heart of this catastrophic event lay the seeds of destruction sown by an individual, the notorious dictator, Adolf Hitler, whose descent into moral decay stripped him of his once-human traits and compassionate nature. John Boyne's poignant novel, "*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*," vividly portrays the horrors perpetuated by Hitler's principles and dictatorship during the Holocaust. The novel painfully depicts the plight of innocent groups, notably the Jewish community, who tragically fell victim to the inhumanity of Hitler's regime. Through the lens of psychological turmoil amidst the Holocaust, the novel also sheds light on the internal conflicts within the Nazi family, whose stringent adherence to ideological boundaries left no room for humane exceptions. The harrowing experiences of the innocent protagonist, Bruno, and his friend Shmuel, serve as a poignant reminder of the tragic consequences that ensued, ultimately claiming their lives in the brutal throes of the Holocaust. Bruno's innocence serves as a lens through which the reader grapples with the moral implications of the Holocaust and the dehumanization of the Jewish community. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, delineates the incidents that took place during Hitler's rule which were analyzed from the perspective of Social Identity Theory. The story clearly portrays how the Nazi beliefs made it very easy for them to create a social categorization of themselves and others (the Jews) and how they internalized their norms, values, and behaviors as a socially desired group. The analysis of the themes of the novel shows that the relationship between 'Bruno – and Shmuel' does not have these socially imposed barriers because made them victims of the society which is quite sad – especially for the nation's histories which experienced such divisions.

Keywords: Humanity, Adolf Hitler, Nazi, Jew, Social Identity Theory, Holocaust

1. Introduction

John Boyne, a contemporary Irish novelist was born on 30 April 1971 in Ireland. Notably, he has authored eleven novels for adults and five for young readers, including the critically acclaimed work, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which achieved New York Times bestseller status and was adapted into a feature film by Miramax. Boyne has also actively contributed to the literary community, serving as a book reviewer for the Irish Times, judging prestigious awards such as the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards and the Green Carnation Prize, and chairing the jury for the 2015 Scotiabank Giller Prize. Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively. It is a perspective that places human interests, values, and dignity at the forefront, emphasizing reason, ethics, and compassion in the quest for a better society and a more fulfilling life. Humanity encapsulates a profound sense of universal interconnectedness, relying heavily on the intricate fabric of social relationships. This interconnectedness fosters a mutual exchange of values, forming a shared ethos that not only shapes the individual self but also extends to enrich the collective experience of humanity. Moreover, the essence of humanity is deeply intertwined with the intricate balance of physiological attributes and intellectual capacities inherent in human nature. Simultaneously, it draws significant influence from the cultural, societal, and environmental factors that contribute to the development of human qualities. The dynamic interplay between nature and nurture is a crucial aspect of understanding humanity, where individual characteristics are shaped not only by inherent traits but also by the cultural and environmental contexts that nurture them. Furthermore, the concept of humanity serves as a moral compass, guiding individuals and societies toward empathy, compassion, and a collective responsibility to foster mutual respect and dignity among all members of the global community. Through an exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of humanity, this research aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics that govern the interconnected nature of human existence. By analyzing the interdependence

between social relationships, physiological attributes, and environmental influences, this study seeks to underscore the importance of fostering empathy, promoting equity, and cultivating environmental sustainability as integral components of a shared global ethos rooted in the recognition of universal dignity and interconnected well-being. This research not only serves as a critical appraisal of the past but also poses an urgent question to the contemporary generation: where does the true essence of humanity reside today? It serves as a stark reminder that the preservation of humanity demands an unwavering commitment to the principles of empathy, justice, and the universal dignity of all individuals. By scrutinizing the intricacies of human behavior and the systemic factors that enable or propagate dehumanization.

2. Literature Review

The events committed during World War II under the Nazi regime inflicted immeasurable suffering upon humanity. The literature on this topic reflects a profound exploration of the human experiences, resilience, and the psychological and sociopolitical impacts of the war. According to Hugo Slim (2007), the notion of humanity is a cosmopolitan or universal ethic, and so humanitarian obligation applies to all parties participating in and affected by conflict. Mr. Best in his book "Humanity in War" (1980) investigates the historical, philosophical, psychological, and, of course, legal sides of a contradictory issue as old as mankind itself: limiting the mutual suffering that men choose to inflict on themselves. His work is full of fascinating facts that provide an overall picture of the historical process leading up to modern international humanitarian law. Mattila (2004) speaks about dehumanization in John Boyne's novel "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas" and how the people were considered during the Nazi camps, "well, they were not people at all". Nugraheni Bhakti Prajaningtyas and Ida Rochani Adi (2020) analyzed the character and characterization, educational components, the happy ending, and the element of pictures in children's books are all elements of the genre of children's literature. To supplement the analysis, library research was undertaken in addition to the novel itself, as well as supporting pieces from reputable sources. The analysis concludes that John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* cannot be classified as children's literature since the qualities of children's literature proposed by Nodelman are not present in the novel.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing a comprehensive textual analysis of John Boyne's renowned novel, "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas." By closely dissecting the text, the study aims to identify and illuminate the key concepts of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the question of humanity portrayed within the narrative. Through the application of a qualitative methodology, this research endeavors to delve deeply into the intricate dynamics that contribute to a holistic understanding of humanity, encompassing its cultural, societal, and environmental dimensions. This research paper analyzes the novel in the light of 'Social Identity Theory' to understand the experiences of the characters with regard to the culture and society they are located in. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a social psychological theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The theory seeks to explain how individuals perceive themselves and others based on group memberships. It emphasizes the role of social identities in those aspects of an individual's self-concept which derive from their membership in social groups by shaping behavior and also their attitude towards intergroup relations. It attempts to answer the questions of how the characters see themselves (Bruno- Nazi) and others (Shmuel- Jew), and why their perspectives of themselves and others matter, especially in perceiving humanity. Such efforts seek to understand this complex interrelation between social identity and experience of the characters. Therefore, by looking through the lenses of characters, their thoughts and emotions and dilemmas of a moral nature in Boyne's narrative reflects the complexities of identity, belonging, and humanity.

4. Results

The horrors of Auschwitz have been immortalized in history, commemorating the lives lost within its confines through the establishment of a museum dedicated to their memory. The brutal conditions within Auschwitz subjected many prisoners to torment through overwork, disease, malnutrition, and the daily struggle for survival. Among the countless victims was Shmuel, a young Jewish boy confined to Auschwitz II. Separated from his father, who was deemed fit for labor by the camp authorities, Shmuel grappled with the psychological trauma of his father's disappearance, further exacerbating the agony of his imprisonment. Children, including Shmuel, were ruthlessly exploited for labor by the German forces, enduring unspeakable atrocities within the camp's confines. Despite the harrowing circumstances, Shmuel and Bruno forged an unlikely friendship, bridging the divide between their different worlds. Bruno, eager to help his friend, clandestinely provided him with food, an act that tragically resulted in Shmuel's punishment when Bruno failed to acknowledge his assistance to the authorities. Overwhelmed with guilt and remorse, Bruno made a solemn promise to assist Shmuel in finding his missing father, igniting a series of events that ultimately led to both boys meeting their tragic fate within the confines of the gas chambers, mirroring the very dehumanization that had plagued their lives. As Sigmund Freud's concept of 'repression' elucidates, the human psyche grapples with inner turmoil, often resorting to defensive mechanisms to shield the self from distressing realities. Freud's theory emphasizes that the internal struggles of the mind may surface in various ways when the protective barriers between the inner and outer worlds are breached. This psychological phenomenon is exemplified in the case of Adolf Hitler, whose deep-seated repression contributed to the cataclysmic events that led to the suffering of millions, underscoring the profound impact of unchecked psychological turmoil on a global scale. People categorize themselves and others into various social groups (race, Gender, nationality). These categories Nazi father who was under the German group simplifies his social world but also lead to stereotyping Jews and biased their entire community. Social identity Theory exposes the dark side of how people in search of social identity with self-esteem, pride, values, and norms lost their humaneness and fail to understand their fellow human beings' psychological turmoil to survive in the world.

5. Discussion

5.1 Social Identity and Humanity in the Novel

John Boyne in his novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, talks about genocide which takes place in a village called out-with away from Berlin. The Nazi commander's family moves from Berlin to the countryside to fulfill his patriot duty which Fury (the fictional name for Adolf Hitler in the novel) has commanded. 'But where?' he asked. 'Where are we going exactly? Why can't we stay here?' 'Your father's job,' explained mother. 'you know how important it is, don't you?' (John 4). Being a man of patriotism Bruno's father the soldier and commandant in the Nazi party without any moral thinking accepts the duty and takes his way to kill his own fellow being. Bruno was mentally affected by seeing his father's promotion, his attitude toward killing his own people, and the new place where they had not been earlier. "Everything about it seemed to be the exact opposite of their old home and he couldn't believe that they were really going to live there...The house in Berlin had stood on a quiet..." (John 12). Bruno and his family remained shielded from the grim realities unfolding around them, unaware of the proximity of the concentration camps near their new residence in Out-With.

5.2 Social Categorization

The unsettling smoke and the stench of decaying bodies emanating from the camps subtly affected Bruno's mother, instilling a sense of fear that compelled her to withhold this knowledge from her children. Despite harboring a clear understanding of the atrocities occurring within the concentration camps, Bruno's parents, regrettably, displayed a striking indifference towards the suffering of those around them. Had Bruno's mother chosen to educate her children about the Holocaust and the horrors of the concentration camps, she might have potentially averted the tragic fate that befell Bruno. As Bruno grapples with the unfamiliarity of his surroundings in Out-With, he embarks on a journey of exploration, attempting to make sense of the peculiarities that captivate his attention from the confines of his window. However, his inquiries are met with unsatisfactory responses from his sister, Gretel, leaving him with a growing sense of unease. Eventually, his explorations lead him to the fenced enclosure, where he encounters individuals adorned in peculiar striped pajamas. It is here that he reunites with Pavel, his compassionate servant who had previously come to his aid. Pavel's melancholic disposition and his frequent mistreatment by Bruno's father and the soldiers serve as poignant reminders of the inhumanity prevalent in their surroundings. He learns from Pavel that he was a Jew and that is why he is here as a servant, but he was a doctor before he came to out-with. 'You're not a doctor'.... he signed and seemed to consider it for quite a long time before saying, 'Yes I am' (John 84). Bruno's father categorized himself as German in the others around him who were not Germans as the different groups belonged to different races and nationalities which made him dominate and enslave Jews for his social identity and self-esteem in order to follow his identity norms and values laid by Adolf Hitler.

The great historical event, in which the world was merely affected is the Second World War. It is still reflected in the world and the ruins of the war are still found in several places. Parker in his book states that, the Second World War initially broke out due to the "Two separate wars made up the 'Second World War': a European war and a Far Eastern War" (Parker 1). He also adds, "After 1941 the United States and the United Kingdom took part in both, while their enemies waged separate wars and, until the last days, the Soviet Union fought only in Europe..." (Parker 1) The actions of Germany and Japan, and the counter actions to them by Britain, France, Poland, and the United States explain the Second World War. Initially, only a few countries took part in the war, but later it was raised to the peak of the political power of Germany. Almost all the nations were involved and had the desire to capture the world and take control. "Christian leaders were certain, however, that the war was not simply another in that series of crises, the last and perhaps worst of a string of catastrophes. They used the word "crisis" frequently and self-consciously to show that the Second World War was unlike any event ... (Sittser 11) Second World War created crisis in the churches and American society faced a series of crises from the beginning of the First World War till the end of the Second World War. Germany, being the great power ruled all over the world and made a drastic attempt to change the history of the world. Nazism shook all the other nations throughout the world, under the great dictatorship of Adolf Hitler and his greatest power was the young soldiers that he had recruited in his army. Stargardt's statement on the war says, In both Italy and Germany, the sense of crisis in July 1943 owed much to the British strategy of 'area bombing'. Italian cities had been targeted from the late autumn of 1942... (Stargardt 192) Nazism was strengthened by the Furher and it gained the courage and power by the words that always prevailed in the minds of the German soldiers. Babik comments on the power of the Furher and the Nazi party that, "Hitler's words at the Party Congress Gross Deutschland in Nuremberg in 1938 provide Burleigh with a good demonstration of this point: "National Socialism," the Furher insisted, "is a cool and highly reasoned approach to reality based upon the greatest of scientific knowledge and its spiritual expression" (Babik 378). Therefore, the authority was in the hands of Hitler and he strengthened his by his motivational and heart-touching words. Being a soldier, who has influenced by the First World War, he made several changes in the military by serving as a soldier and a higher officer. Despite, Hitler's full support in winning the party was by the people of Germany, who voted and elected him, hoping for a faithful leader and a dictator. Kershaw, in an article, adds, Unquestionably, Hitler was a unique historical personality. But the uniqueness of the Nazi dictatorship cannot be reduced to that. It is explained less by Hitler's character, extraordinary as it was, than by the specific form of rule ... (Kershaw 253) The soldiers and the commandants in the Nazi army experienced worse life situations. Though it is a pride and honor for people to exaggerate the achievements of a soldier, who served in the army or even as a higher official in the military, they never appreciate the efforts and sacrifices that they make in serving the nation. The patriotism they possess never comes to the mind of the commoners, who comment on the soldiers. Though it is brutal and cruel to kill another human being, they had to follow the orders of their higher officials like Hitler. Even these soldiers had pity and humanity towards their Jewish neighbors, but they were pushed into a pathetic situation where they couldn't help them. Tim Cole gives a clear vision of the settings of the holocaust and the geographic area of the camp

that killed millions of Jewish people in bunches without humanity. He explains the settings, where the rooms were spotted and built, “genocide and how, as a result, one's survival often depended on spatial criteria. The local, even street-level, scale of implementation through the manipulation of fences, roads, and housing provides new evidence for the historical development of the destruction of the Jew.” (Waitman Beorn 565)

5.3 Social Comparison and the Auschwitz Camp

The historical context surrounding the events in the novel reflects the grim reality of the Holocaust, with Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 serving as a pivotal point in the intensification of the atrocities. As the Nazi regime aggressively sought to establish "Aryan" dominance, the T4 program was implemented, targeting disabled individuals for extermination, emphasizing the systematic devaluation of human life under Nazi rule. Amidst the unfolding Holocaust, Bruno forges an unlikely friendship with Shmuel, a young Jewish boy on the other side of the fence. Despite their innocence, both boys grapple with the heart-wrenching separation and categorization of the Jewish population within the camps, witnessing the devastating impact of the systematic dehumanization and separation of families. The presence of Auschwitz and other extermination camps across Europe further underscores the scale of the horror inflicted upon the Jewish community and other marginalized groups during this tumultuous period. Through Boyne's poignant narrative, the harrowing realities of the Holocaust are vividly brought to life, urging readers to confront the devastating consequences of prejudice, dehumanization, and unchecked authoritarianism. The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of acknowledging historical atrocities and the collective responsibility to safeguard human dignity and prevent such horrors from recurring.

The Auschwitz concentration camp, established by Adolf Hitler during World War II between 1889-1945, stands as a stark testament to the horrors perpetuated under the regime's policy of the 'Final Solution.' This diabolical initiative aimed to systematically dehumanize and exterminate the Jewish population, as well as various other marginalized groups deemed undesirable by the Nazi ideology. "Hitler's vision extended far beyond the segregation and oppression of the Jewish community within Germany and the annexed territories. His radical ambition sought the complete eradication of not only Jews but also artists, educators, Romas, communists, homosexuals, the mentally and physically handicapped, and others considered unfit for survival in Nazi Germany" (History). Auschwitz, the largest of the death camps, was established in the 1940s under the command of Rudolf Hoss. Strategically located on a former military base near the town of Oswiecim in the southern region of Poland, Auschwitz served as a site for the enslavement and forced labor of prisoners. These individuals were subjected to grueling work in the production of synthetic rubber, munitions, and various weapons for the German army. Comprising multiple sections, Auschwitz I initially held nearly 2,000 political prisoners, predominantly Jews. In contrast, Auschwitz II, situated in Birkenau, functioned as the primary extermination camp, housing over 90,000 prisoners at its peak. Notoriously, Auschwitz III operated as a site for the mass gassing of prisoners, disguising the gas chambers as shower facilities to deceive unsuspecting victims. "By mid-1942, the majority of those transported by the Nazis to Auschwitz were Jews. Upon arrival, detainees underwent brutal inspections conducted by Nazi doctors. Those deemed unfit for labor, including young children, the elderly, pregnant women, and the infirm, were herded into the so-called 'bathhouses.' Tragically, these facilities concealed gas chambers, where the prisoners were subjected to Zyklon-B poison gas. Those marked as unfit for labor were never formally registered as Auschwitz inmates" (History). This notorious chapter in human history not only highlights the immense suffering endured by countless individuals but also stands as a stark warning against the dangers of allowing bigotry and intolerance to go unchecked. The relentless dehumanization and extermination of innocent people solely based on their ethnicity, religious beliefs, and social backgrounds reveal the depths of moral degradation humanity can plummet to in times of societal upheaval and ideological fervor. Furthermore, the enduring significance of Auschwitz lies in its ability to transcend the confines of the past and act as a powerful catalyst for contemporary action. By illuminating the darkest corners of human nature, the horrors of Auschwitz compel us to confront the persistent prejudices and discriminatory attitudes that continue to plague societies around the world. Auschwitz is the social comparison where people compare their group (in-group) German to other groups Jew (out-groups) to enhance self-esteem, individuals tend to view their in-group more favorably than out-groups, leading to in- group bias. The testimonies of survivors, seared with the indelible scars of their experiences, serve as a solemn call for widespread social introspection and the urgent need to foster a culture of inclusivity, respect, and dignity for all individuals. In an era fraught with political polarization, xenophobia, and racial tensions, the lessons drawn from the agonizing history of Auschwitz resonate with a pressing urgency. The imperative to foster a global consciousness rooted in compassion, understanding, and human rights remains paramount in the quest to build a more equitable and just world. The enduring legacy of Auschwitz beckons us to embrace the collective responsibility of safeguarding the intrinsic worth and rights of every individual, irrespective of their background or beliefs, and to actively strive towards the creation of a more compassionate and tolerant society.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of John Boyne's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* suggests the far-reaching effects of the Social Identity Theory (SIT) on the characters' notions about themselves and other people and the horrors of the Holocaust. The study also demonstrates how social identity, usually accompanied by self-advocacy, self-pride, and compliance with group norms, causes the loss of humanity. Through the character of Bruno's father, a caricature of a Nazi, the author portrays how categorization and in-group favoritism engender stereotyping of the out-group, in this case, (Shmuel's Jewish people). However, the destructive course of the relationship between Bruno and Shmuel offers a greater perspective on these social processes. The novel also points out that apart from presenting the psychological trauma witnessed during the Holocaust, it also provides the demise of social identity the failure of which leads to indiscriminate dehumanization. The critical literary analysis of *The Boy in The Striped Pajamas* brings to light the moral agonies and the psychological challenges that

any character encounters in a social system highly controlled by one's social category. This research article encounters the knowledge about Patriotism, Innocence and unawareness, Humanity and Compassion, Self-perceptive and Group dynamics of Social Identity Theory(SIT), Dehumanization through SIT, Stereotyping and In-group Favoritism and Tragic outcomes.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my guide, Dr. N.S. Vishnu Priya, for her invaluable guidance, encouragement, and insightful feedback throughout the course of this work. Her experience and mentorship have been instrumental in shaping this article and ensuring its successful completion. I am also deeply grateful to Vellore Institute of Technology for providing the resources and a conducive academic environment that enabled me to carry out this research effectively.

Authors' contributions

R Priskilla Mary: Contributed to the conceptualization and designed the study, collected the data and analyzed thematically and drafted the manuscript.

Dr. N.S. Vishnu Priya: Provided supervision and guidance throughout the study, reviewed and revised the manuscript for intellectual content, and handled correspondence with the journal.

Both authors collaborated closely in refining the research and finalizing the manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

The Authors declare no competing interests.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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