

Understanding Resistance in *The Tin Drum*

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Abstract

The novel, *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass captures well the marginalized, cornered, and subjugated position of disabled people, and the strong resistance shown to authority by the disabled character, Oskar. As Brown says, “resistance can occur for power, inequality and social change.” This resistance can be at the individual level and at the societal level. Oskar, a protagonist in the novel is God-like character of omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Oskar’s resistance is against fascism, power politics, cultural influence, euthanasia killings, and antisemitism. The weapons of Oskar’s resistance are his piercing voice or singshattering voice, and his skill at drumming which will make people immerse themselves in the art. Though a dwarf, Oskar has manipulative powers that an able-bodied individual cannot exhibit. The tin drum is his weapon presented to him by his mother when three years old, and the scream adds impetus to his resistance. With the ability to drum and to shatter glass, he takes control over any situation around him. He is against hegemonic control, aggression, able-bodied norms, and discriminatory practices. Oskar, a genome who had stopped growing at three years old but has the maturity of an adult, understands society, politics, and religious aspects of the world. His resistance is powerful and it is said, “Oskar is more Jesus than Jesus is.” Oskar represents every aspect of life and he is both Satan and Christ. Oskar’s life is led against all odds and is a real victory of a disabled person.

Keywords: Power Politics, Nazism, Eugenics, Asocials, Anti-semitism, Resistance, Drumming, Singshattering

The novel represents invasions, power politics, cultural influence, euthanasia killings, anti-Semitism and fascism. The part of the resistance was against the destruction and decimation of Poland that had been witnessed for many centuries. The people of Poland time and again had to face invasions and violence and destruction on their cities. First came the Swedes, then the Danes, the French and the English. Russians were also part of it, and then came Prussians. They burnt parts of the city and the city lost the designation of Free State. At last came the Poles searching for places of living, and settled and spread their roots. It was in this background that the novel is set. The protagonist in the novel is Oskar; when he was born, he was welcomed by light bulbs and the sound around him. His father, Herr Matzerath said, “Oskar’ll take over business one day. At last we know why we have been working our fingers to the bone!”, but Oskar was not interested and resisted his father’s words and liked his mother offering him a tin drum when he was of three years age. Initially, resistance started for his self-defence; after that, it spread to his daily life and was exercised for the sake of people around him. Oskar had received love and comfort from his mother which had made him adamant and mischievous. At the age of three years, Oskar gets a tin drum as a gift from his mother. The tin drum becomes the weapon of resistance. Oskar declares that he would neither become a politician nor a greengrocer but would remain a three-year-old dwarf. Oskar ignored his father's suggestion of taking over the business at the age of 21 and stopped growing, and devoted himself to drumming but he was three times smarter than his age. He was sound in body and mind, and a smart boy, who had matured inwardly and outwardly. He was unassumingly destructive; no grown-up person could think of his imperishable nature.

Oskar offered resistance at every point in his life, minutely. On his third birthday, when carrying dessert bottles of raspberry, Oskar had fallen down from the steps created a scene where Matzerath was reason for his fall that stopped his growth. Oskar remained as dwarf. It was a winning moment for Oskar as he created guilt in Matzerath, and this incident estranged the relationship between his mother and his father. Oskar’s drumming ability and his scream came to

prominence, and they are a sign of destruction and disturbance. They became weapons of protest, and a means to create fear in people. These are evident in the following lines:

“The ability to drum up the necessary distance between grownups and myself on a toy drum developed soon after my fall down the cellar stairs, almost simultaneously with the emergence of a voice that allowed me to sing, scream, or sing-scream at such a high pitch and with such sustained vibrato that no one dared take away the drum that pained their ears; for when my drum was taken from me I screamed, and when I screamed something quite valuable would burst into pieces: I was able to shatter glass; my scream slew flower vases; my song caused windows to crumple to their knees and let drafts rule; my voice sliced open display cases like a chaste and therefore merciless diamond, and, without losing its innocence, assaulted the harmonious, nobly bred liqueur glasses within, bestowed by loving hands and covered with a light film of dust.”(p52)

Oskar was averse to society and he did not want to be like tall grownups in whatever duties he was asked to do, and wanted to be unique in himself. So, he stopped growing and did not approve his father’s wish to become a green grocer. He did not like any grown up person dictating terms to him. On his fourth birthday when Oskar was presented everything under the sun except the tin drum, he let out a scream and broke all four bulbs of hanging lamps and kept everyone in darkness and made male and female to get attracted to each other and involve in bodily pleasure.

The abusive construction of the disabled is apparent in the excerpt, “Oskar the shattered image of humanity, an accusation, a challenge, a timeless expression of the madness of our century, and ended by thundering across the easels: “Don’t draw this cripple—slaughter him, crucify him, nail him to the paper with charcoal!” (403)

With every new opportunity, Oskar expounded his skill and felt overwhelmed. For Oskar, the Drum is his identity. He never gave a chance to anyone to take the drum from him. Oskar was taken to Dr. Hollatz on Brunshoferweg for body examination to know the reason for his slow growth; the doctor forcefully took the drum away from Oskar; he sing-shattered the entire

glassware of the hospital. When Oskar was to be sent to Pestolozzi School without his drum, he screamed an empty vase to pieces. Even at the school, Oskar did not allow anyone to take his drum and defended himself by screaming his teacher's eyeglasses into pieces.

It was understood that Oskar was the reason for the evil. The Church father blew into Oskar three times to drive Satan out, made cross signs and rubbed on his chest and sprinkled water. Oskar was asked to pronounce the words, 'I do renounce', three times. Oskar was however reluctant to utter the words, Jan Bronski uttered, and this did not spoil Oskar's relation with Satan.

Oskar's acquaintance with the cannibalistic friends expanded his resistance. He learnt long distance screaming and broke the window panes of the Stadt Theater. He also got acquainted with Sigismund Markus, a Jew and toy shop owner, who supplied Oskar with tin drums of all colours. The Nazis considered the Poles living in the Danzig as subhumans, the poles were discriminated, were forced into hard labour, and efforts were made to exterminate them from the city. The Nazis killed innocent Jews living in Danzig. Oskar was against the ill-treatment of Jews in the hands of the Dictator. Oskar though a dwarf challenges the activities of Hitler's men. Oskar considers Bebra, a 'descendant of Prince Eugen' as his role model. Bebra had stopped growing when ten years old. Bebra knew the world and cautioned Oskar about the impending danger for dwarfs and disabled people. They planned a resistance by reading the mood of the rallies and parades in public places and grandstands as an audience. The dwarfs had the advantage that they were too little to lose each other as they could squeeze into even the most crowded grandstands. Bebra and Oskar entertained the crowd at the grandstand greatly. The grandstand had the troupe of Hitler, SS, and SA. It also had bugle corps of Hitler's youth trope. Oskar drummed the entire crowd to jubilation and a team of communist saboteurs escaped from the place. It was Oskar's trick on SA and SS officials; they were no match for him. Yet Oskar, a three-year-old was underestimated for his skill and manipulation. In the year 1938, Oskar was successful in disrupting the events of the Vock where they lose their forces.

Though a small boy, Oskar resists every character in the novel except his mother. It was because of his dislike towards Matzerath Oskar that estranged the relationship between his mother Agnes and Matzerath. That resulted in an illicit relationship between Jan and Agnes which made Agnes feel guilty of her affinity with Jan. The guilt in Agnes led her to consume excess fish, and she died of pneumonia. After his mother's death, in one of his wanderings with Jan, Oskar went to the Polish Post Office. That was the time of war and Hitler's men had surrounded the Post Office. Oskar could not bear their presence but he was oblivious of the war happenings. His resistance was against his presumptive father Jan Bronski. When Hitler's men took the Post Office under their control, Oskar accused Jan of having used him as a human shield. Jan was hanged to death. When Polish people were agitated and frightened and were in a helpless state, Oskar refers to the drum metaphorically as Poland, "A dying toy drum has sought refuge with us. We are Poles, we must protect it, especially since England and France are bound by treaty to defend us."(p 209)

Oskar resisted the Danzig citizens. With his piercing cry, he skillfully broke the window panes and attracted the citizen to steal their choicest things. He tempted them to steal, all and sundry, elderly gentlemen, counter jockeys, maids, and retired teachers, and fulfilled their desire of a lifetime. Oskar cultivated a resistance towards God and the idle presence of Jesus in the Sacred Heart Church. He hung the drum in Jesus's neck and expected Him to drum which would be a miracle. When it did not happen, he removed the drum from Jesus, and declared "Oskar is more Jesus than Jesus is".

When his mother Agnes dies, Oskar did not weep; he resisted. The understanding in him is that he had been with her and knew her guilt. He got convinced that there is no logic in weeping, but attributed it this way, "finally, no longer able to contain myself, I shaped the ideal vision of her gray-eyed beauty on my drum at Mama's deathbed" (p149). He feels his mother had got rid of the guilt of the triangular relationship. Oskar resisted any kind of discrimination, in his mothers' funeral and he allowed Markus, a Jew to participate. After his mother's death, he stopped visiting Sister Inge; his Saturday visit to the church and Allstadt theatre ended. He lost interest in rallies and trumpeters' trade. His resistance to people made him shift his interest to books. Later in three

years, Oskar got acquainted with Roswitha Raguna, Italy's most famous Somanabulist. He narrated his story to her, and presented a heart-shaped sang-shattered glass. As it was the time of war, Oskar sensed that there was a danger for midget tin drummers; so he secured one intact and two damaged drums; Oskar had worked on various jobs for his livelihood.

Oskar, aged sixteen year old was taken care of by Maria, aged seventeen. Maria bought Oskar a tin drum every four weeks once. She considered Oskar as a small child, who was immature and who needed to be taken care of like a child; but resisted to show his maturity. She would attend to him sometimes half-dressed unaware of the pretentious character of Oskar. He had a good time watching Maria naked. He attracted her with his drumming. Maria giving bath and scrubbing and undressing awakened shame in Oskar and aroused the sexual desire in him. No character was aware of Oskar's playfulness with his own sexual desire. The downplaying and underestimation of Oskar as a dwarf and considering him as a disabled cost other characters in the novel their self-respect.

Oskar as a dwarf is manipulative enough to kill his presumptuous father, Alfred Matzerath. Oskar resisted Maria marrying Matzerath. Though he did not succeed, he was clever and mature enough to sleep with Maria on the pretext of being a dwarf and of small stature. He impregnated Maria and considered himself, father to Kurt and husband to his stepmother. "That made a father of me, yes, a father, so young a father, from spittle to father, awakening feelings, a father, gathering and begetting; for by early November there was no room for doubt, Maria was pregnant, Maria was in her second month, and I, Oskar, was the father". (p 268) Oskar was increasingly conscious of his breed in Maria's womb. He was against the idea that Matzerath would take name for it. So, Oskar tried to cause harm to the foetus in Maria's womb, but did not succeed.

Oskar's determination to pursue Maria and resist Matzerath having her, made Oskar attract Maria. At one instance when Oskar went with fizz powder and spittle in his palm. She kicked him and scolded him: "a dirty pig, a nasty dwarf, a crazy midget that should be thrown in the nuthouse. Then she grabbed me, slapped the back of my head, reviled my poor mama for having brought a brat like me into the world, and just as I was about to aim a scream at all the glass in the living room and in the whole world, she stuffed my mouth with that Turkish towel".(p 273)

As per the advice of Oskar to deter Hitler's momentum of war the dusters stormed the Office of the Economic Affairs and buried the weapons and gasoline in the garden. Oskar used his piercing voice to sing-shatter the windows, several party offices, the courtyard windows of printing press, windows of the high school principal room. He went beyond Danzig to exhibit his skill of sing-shattering. Oskar sangshattered the boxlike structures of office doors of the Hitler Youth district headquarters. The dusters stole party cash boxes, food ration cards, most important of all official rubber stamps, preprinted forms or a member list of the Hitler Youth Patrol. All this was done in the name of Jesus.

Oskar made mockery of the Church for discriminatory practices favouring one set or community. When Oskar was in Church along with the dusters, who ordered to disfigure the shrine. He asked the dusters to carry figures of shepherds, angels, sheep, ass, and cow to his cellar. The boy Jesus was sawed off and Oskar was made to sit on Jesus' place on Holy Virgins thigh, as someone worthy of worship.

Oskar's resistance to Matzerath: When Matzerath was killed by Russians, Oskar at first resisted burial rituals but later decided to be part of it; by this time his son Kurt was also there. At one point, Oskar confessed that he had deliberately killed his presumptive father as he did not want Matzerath to be there in his life. He was also not his real father. Oskar threw his drum and sticks on Matzerath's coffin. Oskar ended all resistance at his father's funeral and decided to grow. Oskar resisted the currency reform which benefited a selected few and affected many daily wagers; because of that Oskar himself was to lose the job of stonecutting. He openly criticized the currency reform as a reform done in the interest of bourgeois. Oskar was affirmative in saying that if he had not lost the job, he would have grown to be a business man and would have participated in the reconstruction of Germany.

Oskar, a wanderer could not establish himself in any stable job. He worked on various jobs as an entertainer in the Nazi camps, a leader of the dusters, a percussionist in Klepp's band, a stonecutter, posing as a model and entertaining the crowds in concert halls. His recordings were sold like hot cakes but Oskar was not happy with all this. He wanted a marital life; he consulted Maria but she did not approve of it, and he could not possess Sister Dorothea. In his life

everything was short lived and he became cynical and resisted public life and got convicted for no crime of him, he was imprisoned later was acquitted.

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