

[Heavy Silence and Horrible Grief: Reconstructing the Past and Securing the Future through Magical Realism in Joseph Skibell's *A Blessing on the Moon*]

Md Abu Shahid Abdullah

East West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

[Abstract] *This article deals with Joseph Skibell's A Blessing on the Moon. It aims to show how the author provides a graspable representation of an ineffable event like the Holocaust by using magical realism and Jewish tradition, ritual and folk belief, thus coming forward with an alternative (hi)story that is different from the dominant history. The article focuses on the importance of remembering and storytelling in order to overcome the trauma of the Holocaust. The author also argues that the protagonist's ability to restore the moon symbolises the possibility that Jewish history – despite the trauma of the Holocaust – has not come to an end.*

[Keywords] *Holocaust; memory; horrible grief; inexpressible trauma; heavy silence*

[1] Introduction

In “Making Sense of the World”, Joseph Skibell tells Andrew Beierle about his grandfather’s escape to the United States (along with two of his brothers) to survive the Holocaust, as well as about his (Skibell’s) concern with the horrific death of his relatives during the Holocaust:

When I was growing up, my grandfather and two of his brothers were living in my town. They never talked at all about these people, and as a normally sensitive child, I picked up on it. That silence was very palpable for me. As a child, I assumed that there was some sort of shame in it. Instead, I realized later that it was just horrible, horrible grief. (Beierle)

The statement shows the unspeakable trauma of the Holocaust and the survivors’ reluctance to talk about it because of the brutality it entailed. Just like other writers from the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors who have no experience of these horrific events, Skibell attempts to recover a family history which, apart from some photographs, has completely disappeared with the passage of time. Through the ghostly figure of Chaim, he attempts to access a past he has never experienced, to reconstruct this inaccessible past from an imaginative standpoint, and to revive his great-grandfather out of silence. By giving voice to Chaim Skibelski, he has actually given the oppressed and murdered Jews a voice and thus enabled them to narrate their untold stories.

A Blessing on the Moon can be considered an attempt to revive the victims of the Holocaust and to place them on the border between fantasy and reality in order to give them a voice. Although Skibell attempted to revive his great-grandfather and other Jewish victims, he received criticism because of his allegedly disrespectful style of representing the victims. According to Michelle Ephraim, although Skibell uses the name of his great-grandfather as the narrator in the novel, academics and researchers have criticised the book for going against “the unspoken rules of Holocaust fiction by representing Jewish victims not as heroic martyrs, but as a group laden with human imperfections... Skibell’s novel fails [...] because the author neglects a social responsibility to represent victims with the utmost reverence” (qtd. in Kersell 20). Although Ephraim criticised Skibell for not showing respect to the murdered Jews and for depicting them as a group of people with human errors instead of mythifying them, it is this natural depiction which makes the reader empathise with the victims. Chaim Skibelski’s portrayal as an ordinary human being, no different from the rest of us, wins our empathy for him, thus emphasising rather than reducing the horror of the events. It can thus be claimed that Skibell depicts Chaim as a representative of the oppressed Jews, his voice providing us with an alternative history which is very different from the one written by the dominant authorities, and which is thus unknown to the outside world.

In *A Blessing on the Moon*, Skibell employs magical realism using Jewish folktales in telling the story of one of his forefathers. By using supernatural elements and bringing dead Jews back to life in the novel, Skibell makes the victimised stronger than the victi-

misers. This article aims to show how the author provides a graspable representation of an inexpressible event like the Holocaust by using magical realism and Jewish tradition, ritual and folk tales, thus coming forward with an alternative (hi)story that is different from the dominant history. It shows how the protagonist Chaim represents the suffering of the entire Jewish race through his own grief, traumatised and obsessed with the past, and how Chaim becomes the mouthpiece of the Jewish people. The article also argues that Chaim's ability to restore the moon symbolises the possibility that Jewish history – despite the trauma of the Holocaust – has not come to an end. Last but not least, the article focuses on the importance of remembering and storytelling in order to overcome the trauma of the Holocaust.

[2] Magical Realism and Its Association with Trauma

The term 'magical realism' has been defined and applied by authors and researchers from different parts of the world in a complex and paradoxical way. Although the term was initially coined to depict a trend in German painting, its focus later shifted to literature, particularly to fiction. Magical realism is the very opposite of what is called the absolutist and the traditional. Through magical events, writers can find new viewpoints and open new windows through which they can see the world differently and thus provide us with a different perception of reality. Magical realist writers, according to Abrams, fuse a sharply carved realism in presenting everyday events and deceptive details along with fantastical elements and materials that originated from myths and tales (Abrams 196). Identified traits of magical realism include the coexistence of the real and the imaginary, dexterous time shifts, complicated narratives and stories, various uses of dreams, myths, magic, rituals, folk and fairy stories, and the use of opposites or dualities. The repetitive narrative in a magical realist novel exists in parallel with a distorted sense of time, space and identity. The use of opposites or dualities enables authors to analyse any given event from more than one point of view and thus leads the reader closer to the truth or reality.

Magical realism can be considered an alternative form of writing which is used to challenge the dominant writing (official history) by representing traumatic events from the standpoint of the oppressed. Now, the question is how magical realism accesses and recreates the impenetrable and unreachable reality of various traumatic events from a more apprehensible point of view. Through multiple perspectives on reality and the disruption of categories, magical realist writers create a fictional realm, employing empathy and imagination to turn traumatic memory into a narrative. This particular narrative technique wraps traumatic events in mist and magic, presenting them to the reader in a graspable way so as not to disgust or repel readers. Magical realism is able to portray violent and traumatic events by mixing them with myth and magic, but at the same time it succeeds in conveying the intended message to the reader without distorting the view of

history. In this sense, magical realism should not, and must not, be considered an escape from violent or fatal situations, but rather a universal approach to representing social, cultural and political reality and violent historical events. A magical realist text dealing with trauma (personal and historical) provides characters with relief via the supernatural, but it does not distort our (or their) sense of reality.

Writing a piece of literature on the Holocaust without having direct experience of the events sometimes becomes problematic, as most critics of Holocaust literature are inclined to question the authority of a proxy witness's voice on the basis of their background, religion or connection to the event. However, since the survivors' generation is slowly disappearing and very soon there will be no authentic voices alive to speak about the Holocaust, witness accounts have been replaced by more fictional literary representations of the events. This type of representation might be less reliable than witness/survivor accounts, but it still possesses a legitimacy of its own. Ortner brings to light the complex condition of the post-war generations and at the same time their responsibility in relating the traumatic stories of their forefathers (Ortner 83). Jonathan Safran Foer and Joseph Skibell have described how they inherited silence over the Holocaust trauma from their parents, who in turn had inherited the same silence from their parents; they never talked about the Holocaust but it haunted their dining table like a dense layer of fog.

According to Rothberg, two approaches to the literary representation of the Holocaust are dominant, which he labels "realist and antirealist" (Rothberg 3). He explains these approaches:

By realist I mean both an epistemological claim that the Holocaust is knowable and a representational claim that this knowledge can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe... By antirealist I mean both a claim that the Holocaust is not knowable or would be knowable only under radically new regimes of knowledge and that it cannot be captured in traditional representational schemata. (Rothberg 3–4)

I argue that magical realism fits into the antirealist approach to the Holocaust due to its subversive, transgressive and unconventional representational features. Magical realism, according to Jenni Adams, "offers an important strategy in attempts to continue the project of Holocaust representation into the post-testimonial era, permitting a form of literary engagement with these events that nevertheless acknowledges its ethical and experiential distance from the real" (1–2). It can be depicted and employed as a response to the difficulties and risks inherent in Holocaust representation. John Burt Foster Jr. has suggested that magical realism "characteristically responded to the harshness of modern history by developing a compensatory vision" (Foster 271). Magical realism thus provides an artistic and intellectual solution to the issue of understanding and representing the genocide.

[3] “Everyone I Know Has Disappeared into the Ash”: Traumatic Memories and Alternative Voices

The reader encounters the issue of trauma from the very first scene of the novel: the death scene of Chaim and his fellow Jews. Just like the massacre scenes in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (depicting the Jallianwala Bagh massacre) and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (depicting the killing of protesting labourers), Skibell is also short of words:

They rounded us up, took us out to the forests. We stood there, shivering, like trees in uneven rows, and one by one we fell. No one was brave enough to turn and look. Guns kept cracking in the air. Something pushed into my head. It was hard, like a rock. I fell. But I was secretly giddy. I thought they had missed me.

[...]

I was lying in a pit with all my neighbors, true, but I was ecstatic... And later, as dusk gathered, I climbed out of the grave [...] and I ran through the forests. Nobody saw me. (Skibell 3–4)

This quotation shows the brutality of the soldiers and the helplessness of the Jews. It also shows Chaim's desire to be alive, which is a universal phenomenon. In depicting the entire scene, Skibell relies on physical sensation rather than on language. Everything happens so quickly that, apart from being violent, this scene also seems exciting to Skibell.

It is crucial for the reader to accept that even after his death, Chaim will behave like any normal human being, and that he will be able to communicate with the world of the living in an intelligible way. The unconditional acceptance of a dead person as a living one strongly indicates the use of magical realist techniques in the novel. Being a dead person, Chaim could well be considered an unreliable narrator: one significant feature of magical realism. Thus, the story he tells from the perspectives of the victimised will obviously be different from a story told from the perspective of the victimisers, as he himself has faced atrocity and even returned to the world of the living after his death. The process of working through trauma, which is manifested in Chaim's suffering and wandering after his death, reaches its peak in the very last part of the novel, when Chaim sets out on a mission for the mysterious moon that will finally be returned to the sky. The accomplishment of his mission will restore not only his life but also the future of the entire Jewish race as portrayed in the novel. Apart from Chaim's trauma, the novel is also characterised by what LaCapra has called the “contagiousness of trauma” (LaCapra 81), which is shown by the condition of Ola, a Polish girl; LaCapra terms her situation “surrogate victimage” (LaCapra 114). The dirty conditions of her room, according to Grimwood, “come gradually to resemble those of a concentration camp's barracks, rendering visible through her illness what has been covered over by law, society, and her family: the

disappearance and murder of the Jews” (Grimwood 93–94). Comparing the condition of Ola’s room with that of a concentration camp indicates the omnipresence of trauma in the novel.

Renders notes that magical realist writers eliminate the difference between reality and magic and create exactly the sense of uncertainty and discomfort that is required to shift the terror of the Holocaust to the reader (Renders 10). She states that Skibell takes the reader into a magical world consisting of “the walking dead Jews, the falling moon, Jesus and Mary floating in a carriage, the transformation of a rabbi into a crow, the talking wolves, the magical healing river, the talking head of the German, and other magical elements as if they were really there in the reality of the novel” (Renders 10). Again, after emerging from his grave, Chaim walks to his village and notices some strange phenomena: “A dozen workmen were lifting all the memories into carts and driving off... In front of every house were piles of vows and promises, all in broken pieces. How I could see such things, I cannot tell you” (Skibell 4). The broken pieces of memories and promises actually refer to the unfulfilled dreams or desires of the dead Jews, and Chaim is not at all astonished by the magical fact that he can see abstract objects or concepts, such as memories and promises, just like he can see material objects. Another magical event takes place after Chaim’s death, when he finds himself capable of understanding the language of animals such as pigs and goats: “‘Can we rely on the villagers for protection?’ one of the pigs says, his voice quavering with rage. ‘Think again, my friends,’ a goat warns, shaking his gray beard, although none of them seems convinced” (Skibell 7). This quotation might refer to the fact that the unimaginable extent of the atrocity of the Holocaust forces even animals to be concerned and scared, and thus shows their lack of confidence in the villagers.

Furthermore, when Chaim realises that he is dead yet is still able to think and feel, he does not seem to be surprised and accepts this magical fact as a part of reality. He even discusses the ordinary life of the people who have occupied his residence:

AT HOME, ANDRZEJ and his cousins are playing cards. A bottle of potato vodka stands in the middle of their green-felt card table. There are small tumblers for everyone.

“If the yids want the moon,” Big Andrzej says, removing one of my best cigars from between his teeth, “then what’s it to us?” [...] “Let them keep it,” he says. “They’re the only ones who ever used it. It’s not as if they took the sun.”

“Now that *would* be a crime,” his wife says, moving through the room with an armful of dirty plates. (Skibell 26)

To emphasise the realism of the scene, Skibell seems to describe ordinary and everyday features of life – a family playing cards, a bottle of vodka, Andrzej’s cigar, a woman washing the dishes – in great detail. The magical or impossible fact that the moon is missing from the sky seems just a part of everyday conversation, a part of ordinary life. This unquestioned coexistence of mundane events and magical elements suggests that the employment of magical realism in the text displays a deeper understanding of sorrow and suffering.

It can be asserted that many magical realist elements in Skibell's novel symbolically convey a sense of trauma. When Chaim is threatened and attacked by the same soldier who shot him at the beginning of the novel – “‘One step more,’ he says, ‘and I’ll kill you again’” (Skibell 93) – this can be read as a sign of the repetitive compulsion characterising the process of acting out trauma. However, this time Chaim understands that the soldier cannot shoot and kill him because he is already dead; he therefore fights back. The appearance of a dead person – here a murdered soldier – in the midst of reality is a typical feature of magical realism. Because of the subversive power of magical realism, the power hierarchy is reversed, as the perpetrator (the soldier) depends on the pity of the victim (Chaim). By bringing the dead Jews back to life in his novel, Skibell makes the victims more powerful than their killers.

Decavele states: “Since magical realism draws on temporal and spatial confusion to disorientate its characters and readers, it is only a small step for the mode to simulate traumatic disorientation” (25). Chaim loses track of time after his death, and after surviving his incineration at Hotel Amfortas, he experiences a complete loss of his sense of space: “I feel like a sleepwalker who awakens far from his home with no idea how he arrived here” (Skibell 187). This loss of sense of time and space, which is a magical realist element, indicates that Chaim is engulfed with a high level of trauma. Again, the return of the traumatic event gives Chaim the chance to face the event of his death once again, and thus enables him to overcome his trauma. The persistence of traumatic memories is also evident in the scene where Chaim sits with his family members around a dinner table at the beautiful Hotel Amfortas and talks about the way each of them died. The grandson's light-hearted account of a grave event such as a medical killing makes Chaim think of the heinous crimes committed by the victimisers.

In order to remove the family's silence over the Holocaust trauma by turning it into an imaginary story, Skibell employs fairy tales, (Yiddish) folk tales and culture, myth and magic – all of which are elements of magical realism. In analysing the use of fairy tales to narrate the story of the Holocaust, Grimwood argues, “Children and grandchildren of survivors often write from the perspective of having grown up with the more disturbing aspects of their family's history functioning as their childhood stories’ (Grimwood 86). Views from childhood then re-emerge in the work of writers from the second and third generation, as is the case in *A Blessing on the Moon* (86–87). Skibell finds an interesting association between the imaginative reconstruction of the Holocaust and its foreshadowing in the tales of the Grimm Brothers: “[I]t always struck me how much the Holocaust [...] seemed foreshadowed in the tales of the Brothers Grimm: [T]he oven in Hansel and Gretel becomes the ovens of Auschwitz; the pied piper [...] of Hamelin is the story of World War II” (Skibell 261).

“Hansel!” one of the middle bakers calls out, and he and his fellows move towards a large pantry. “Hansel, stick your finger out so I can see if you are fat enough!” The others respond with jovial laughter. The men open the pantry door, disappearing inside.

“There will again be sweetness in the world,” the head baker sings, rubbing his hands in glee. (180–182)

The laughter of the bakers shows that they know the tale of Hansel and Gretel and that they see its association with the Holocaust. The head baker's ecstasy resembles the joyful imagination of the fairytale witch of her dinner.

Skibell's liking for Yiddish folk tales is quite evident in his novel, which includes several references to the *Mayseh Book*. The name of the book is mentioned twice: first, in the title of the first part (“From the *Mayseh Book*”), and second, when Chaim refers to it after his house is occupied by the Andrzej family: “Upstairs are three more sons, big snoring lummoxes, asleep in Ester's and my bed. Fully clothed they are, with even their boots on. It's like a fairy tale from the *Mayseh Book*!” (Skibell 6). The “animal metamorphosis”, one of the three types of metamorphosis found in the *Mayseh Book* (Starck-Adler 156), is evident in Skibell's novel: the transformation of the Rabbi into a crow (Skibell 5); the ability of animals such as goats and pigs to talk (7); and the ability of the leader of the wolf pack to stand on its back legs and talk just like a man and its claim to know Chaim (Skibell 89–91). Again, the magical disappearance of the moon from the sky is drawn from the Yiddish folktale of two Hasidic Jews who reach the moon by boat. After arriving on the moon, they discover silver, and out of greed, they overload the boat with the precious metal. The boat falls from the sky and pulls the moon down with it, leaving the world in darkness (Skibell 43). However, the depiction of these events in Skibell's novel differs from those in the original tales due to the magical realist emphasis on comprehensive images of experiential sensations or perceptions, creating a realistic ambiance; as Faris states, “the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world” (7). Skibell's skillful inclusion of Jewish mythology in his magical realist novel has added another layer to the representation of the Jewish people's traumatic experience.

[4] Individualising Intense Grief, Extreme Traumatization and Obsession with the Past

Unlike other products of imagination, pain can rarely be depicted in language (Arva 83) because pain is “objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal. But it is also its objectlessness that may give rise to imagining...” (Scarry 161–162). Scarry's statement is very interesting as it hints at the subjectivity of pain. With regard to Scarry's statement, Arva remarks:

If imagination compensates for the objectlessness of pain, it follows that [...] magical realism succeed[s] in stimulating pain by turning it into objects (images) that literary language can convey more suitably (in regard to their unspeakable nature) and more effectively (in terms of their accessibility by both author and reader). (Arva 83)

It can be surmised from *Arva* that through magical realist language, human perception translates an unspeakable or inexpressible condition (pain or trauma) into a decipherable image and tangible reality. This is evident in the case of Chaim, as Skibell attempts to turn his sorrow and suffering into a narrative. In his attempt to revive his great-grandfather, Skibell always reminds the reader that Chaim is dead and that although the presence of death is explicitly visible throughout the whole novel – bullet marks, non-stop bleeding, the decay of the body – Chaim displays most of the attributes of the living: he thinks, acts, and shows various emotions. With the help of magical realist narrative, Chaim, a dead and mutilated Jew, is shown to possess all the features of a living person.

Skibell shows enormous imaginative power, using supernatural elements as well as Jewish myth and folklore to access a past which has long been buried, and to depict the sorrow and suffering of Jews during the Holocaust. He thus comes up with a history which is unknown, and has long been unknowable, to the outside world. Janet Burstein notes:

A “dead and mutilated Jew”, [Chaim] haunts this world, wishing to leave but unable to let it go. He cannot be healed or restored to life, and before he is released into forgetfulness he will need to wander the earth, listening to the sorrows of others both alive and dead, asking unanswerable questions about forgiveness and responsibility. (125)

Thus, Chaim's suffering is not only his own, but that of the entire Jewish community. He is remembered and magically brought back to life as the mouthpiece of his community. The act of remembering is very significant as a way of accessing (at least partial) knowledge and understanding of inexpressible past events. Unless and until a traumatic event is remembered and talked about, people cannot have a comprehensive idea about the event and victims cannot have control over it.

Skibell depicts a scene in which some non-Jewish people – being motivated by greed and probably by anti-Semitism – assist the Nazis in rounding up Jews (Skibell 9–10). He also shows how Chaim's family home was occupied by intruders (Skibell 12). According to Dean, both scenes represent historical truth: the first scene includes the involvement of non-Jewish people in persecuting and executing Jews, and the second illustrates what happens when survivors return to their homes only to find that their neighbours are living in their houses and are reluctant to return their properties to them (Dean 94–95). Chaim's experiences in the novel point to the fact that Skibell's novel is based on survivors' tales and historical facts. After returning to their homes, many survivors were isolated from their communities and were unable to resume their former lives. Thus, they faced a sort of legal death in the community.

Cathy Caruth states that in the case of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), “the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them” (151). Caruth's statement refers to the possessiveness of trauma through disturbing images and recurring thoughts. Chaim seems to be full of intense grief over having lost his family members and his town's people, as well

as suffering an acute sense of guilt for having survived. Again, Chaim's possession by the past and the extreme sense of loss is symbolised by his eternal bleeding. This bleeding is described in quite the same magical realist manner in which Márquez depicted the movement of blood in the mysterious death of José Arcadio in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

The bleeding has begun again [and] I feel it gurgling down my neck, leaking from the wounds in the back of my head... Because I no longer breathe, I'm able to pull the knot remarkably tight. But the blood simply reroutes itself and emerges from the star-like pattern of holes across my back and chest. It drains into my pockets and pools there, eventually cascading like a fountain. (Skibell 18–19)

Here, a normal substance like blood is defamiliarised by the magical realist narrative, thus imbuing the scene with a magical aura. This is an example of what Christopher Warnes terms 'irreverent magical realism', in which an ordinary object is depicted as having mysterious characteristics. The weird movement of blood and Chaim's inability to get rid of it may also refer to his continuous struggle with traumatic experiences.

The miserable condition of the headless German soldier also shows the lack of control: "[...] the head shouts frantic commands to its body – 'Over here! Schnell! Schnell!' – but, of course, the body is deaf without its ears" (Skibell 94). The constant mentioning of bullet holes also represents the ubiquity of suffering: "The water rises in the tub, seeping through my bullet holes, filling the hollows of my body with its creeping warmth" (Skibell 67). Chaim even fails to enjoy his food because of the exhaustion caused by the death of his family members and friends. The intense grief, extreme traumatising, and obsession with the past stop Chaim from enjoying food; the faces of his dead family members float in front of his eyes. Arva says: "Chaim's feelings of estrangement, caused by his unique experience of loss, the continuing sense of guilt for having survived, and the breakdown in communication with non-witnesses, are characteristic of most Holocaust survivors" (237).

[5] Restoring Life and Storytelling

In order to overcome trauma, we need to remember the past and to turn this traumatic memory into a readable narrative. As Laub suggests:

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story [...]. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. (Laub, "Truth and Testimony" 63)

Laub's statement highlights the fact that it is only through storytelling, and thus confronting the past, that one can gain a better understanding of one's life. However, Laub stresses the necessity of an empathetic listener and/or reader, as he notes that healing

trauma requires “an empathic listener, or [...] an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 68).

The necessity of narrating one’s story and the significance of an enthusiastic listener are explained in Skibell’s novel when Chaim tries to share his stories with the Polish peasants but does not find any way out. Ola and the two Hasidic Jews, Zalman and Kalman, are the only living persons with whom Chaim can share his stories. Ola is traumatised seeing the suffering of the Jews, and feels sympathy with Chaim. According to Grimwood, Ola suffers from pangs of conscience: it is “her grief and distress [by realising what actually happened] that lead to her fatal illness” (Grimwood 93). However, it is interesting to note that Chaim himself is also unwilling to listen to stories of other traumatised people, a phenomenon which sheds light on the difficulty of being an empathetic listener and the possibility of being vicariously traumatised. However, the healing act does not occur here, as Chaim fails to face the past and share his story with others.

When survivors – both in real life and magical realist stories – fail to narrate their stories orally, they may resort to writing. Unable to find any willing listener, Chaim starts writing down all his thoughts in an old ledger book. Although initially it seems to work, the longer he is dead, the more his endeavour fails: “[...] but my words are as dry and my sentences are as circular as wood shavings” (Skibell 39). This sentence also points to the concept of the repetitive nature of trauma, and refers to the necessity of a non-linear or circular narrative capable of representing this circular, repetitive trauma. However, his language fails him when it comes to writing down his traumatisation, and in the scene where Chaim fails to read a letter written by the Rabbi:

“Yes, I got your note. Only how could I read it, scrawled in that pigeon scratch, you shouldn’t be offended.”

“Chaimka,” the jaw of his beak slackens. “That was Yiddish.”

“Yiddish?” I say. Impossible! (Skibell 67)

He is surprised to find that the note was written in Yiddish, a language he should definitely understand. Chaim fails to depict his traumatic situation in his native language, which is very much linear and, to some extent, direct. The high degree of his trauma demands an extraordinary narrative far beyond the ordinary, a subversive narrative capable of penetrating the strong defence of traumatic events and thus voicing the unspeakable and the unspoken.

The desire to tell stories of traumatic events is well associated with the issue of memory and the disruption of identity. By not remembering the past and relating it to the present by means of a suitable narrative, one is more likely to be dissociated from one’s past – which may ultimately result in a fragmented self and identity. Traumatized subjects need to create narratives – often filled with myth, magic and imagination – so that they can gain control over their past and present life. Since Chaim fails to bear witness to his traumatic events due to the lack of a suitable narrative, both in speech and in writing, he gradually loses his personal history, all his memories, and, ultimately, his identity.

Chaim has suffered greatly throughout the whole novel, but his actual journey begins after the death of Ola. Initially, he spent much of his time within his old home, caring for the sick Ola. When he visits the mass grave of his fellow Jews for the first time, he talks with them; the second time, he sets them free. The scene where a Jewish voice from the grave is heard by Chaim, who is also a dead man, defies the order of the rational world but is presented in a matter-of-fact manner in the midst of ordinary reality. The existence, acceptance and the rising of the dead in the midst of reality – a typical characteristic of magical realism – demonstrates the strength of Jewish victims even after their death. Another interesting fact about the narrative is that the protagonist and narrator Chaim dies at the very beginning of the novel and that he continues to narrate his story as a dead man. The fact that our narrator is unreliable (since he is dead) hints at one significant aspect of the magical realist narrative: multiple versions of truth and reality. Through this unreliable narrator, an alternative history, an unknown world, is exposed to the reader.

The reappearance of the soldier who previously killed Chaim gives him the opportunity to deal with the injustice of his death. The head confesses the horror of the soldier's action: "I have done things, Herr Jude, during the last days of my life, that I never dreamed possible, things which, as a child or as a young man, I would not have believed myself capable. I don't need to detail them to you. You are only too familiar with the kind of thing I mean" (Skibell 111). It is significant that the same head that earlier talked with Chaim in a snobbish and derogatory tone – "I'm not prepared to argue the theoretics of warfare here and now with a *dead Jew*" (Skibell 98; emphasis added) – is now addressing him as "Herr Jude", acknowledging the terror of the soldier's action, and recognising Chaim's victimisation. Again, since Chaim is addressed with a general rather than a particular name, it might also be possible that the head (the German soldier) has killed more Jews than just Chaim, and that it is now acknowledging the victimisation of all those killed by it or, even, all the Jews murdered during the Holocaust. Through the subversive power of magical realism, Skibell disrupts the binary border between victims and victimisers and transforms the vulnerable and weak Chaim into a much more privileged person who is now stronger than the very soldier who previously killed him. By making Chaim more powerful than his victimisers, Skibell tries to give back to the whole Jewish community their human dignity.

[6] Journey of the Dead Jews: Restoring the Moon and Securing the Future

Although initially the luxurious Hotel Amfortas, which Chaim and his fellow Jews encounter during their after-death journey, seems to be a resting place for Jews, it is the representation of a concentration camp. Depicting the horror of the concentration camp and the Holocaust in general proves to be a very difficult task for Skibell, since he has never had any access to that experience. In order to recreate the trauma of the concentration camp during the Holocaust, he introduces the elegant Hotel Amfortas in the novel, and shows an association between the two. Just like the real concentration camps of the Holocaust,

this fictional hotel is also deceptive. Under the disguise of a sumptuous outer appearance, it is actually a graveyard for Jewish people, where all the members of Chaim's family die for the second time. Since the reality of the camps is not accessible to either Skibell or other second- or third-generation witnesses, Skibell creates the magnificent and seductive Hotel Amfortas "as a means for allowing the intergenerational witness entry into the event by drawing on a more accessible representation" (Dean 108). What Dean does not include in her discussion is that in order to revive the silenced stories of the ancestors, intergenerational witnesses like Skibell must resort to imagination. However, sometimes ordinary imagination fails to represent events like the Holocaust. Magical realism enables them to use their out-of-the-ordinary type of imagination and to expose the cruelties of the Holocaust, and thus provides us with a marginalised version of history.

The story of the absence of the moon is examined frequently in the novel. Ola asks Chaim "to [...] take her to the roof to search for the moon" (Skibell 39), but later she exclaims: "It's cracked!" (Skibell 46). The absence of the moon is a recurring topic of conversation among the victimised Jews: "'Do I have the moon?' [...] 'Do you have the moon? No, but still, we're all thieves! We're all to blame!'" (Skibell 81). Grimwood explains that, since ancient times, the moon and the lunar cycle have played a major role in Jewish tradition and religion, where it is considered a symbol of Israel, undergoing the phases of waning and waxing parallel to Israel's cycles of historic rise and fall (Grimwood 90). The novel's title itself refers to a Jewish tradition which requests "that the moon should be blessed on its reappearance each month" (Grimwood 90). In the novel, Chaim and the two Hasidic Jews use this tradition when attempting to restore the moon to the sky. The suffering of Jews is presented symbolically by a magical event – the disappearance of the moon from the sky. In other words, Skibell compares the unimaginable extent of the Holocaust violence with the bizarre incidence of the disappearance of the moon: a magical and to some extent impossible event which is shown in the midst of reality. Now, by giving Chaim the challenging task of returning the moon to the sky, Skibell actually gives him an opportunity to restore the future of the Jewish race despite the Holocaust.

This scene of returning the moon to the sky is perhaps the most strongly magical realist scene in the novel. Motivated and assisted by Zalman and Kalman, who are responsible for the disappearance of the moon and who have been waiting for it for fifty long years, Chaim starts searching for the moon, and ultimately finds it buried in a graveyard. The moon shows the damage done by years of war, which possibly suggests the burial of hope and faith under the weight of the killing of the Jews. Although hope is restored with the return of the moon to the sky, Chaim's observation that "the moon's surfaces are not clear, but have been mottled, as though with dark and purple bruises" (Skibell 243) signifies the lasting impact of the Holocaust on the history of the Jewish people. Alan L. Berger directly associates the moon with Jewish people when he asserts that the return of the moon to the sky stands for the possibility of the continuation of Jewish history after the Holocaust. Chaim's ability to "raise [and restore] the moon symbolizes the possibility that Jewish history – despite the trauma of the Holocaust – has not come to an end" (Berger 154).

At the end of the novel, while restoring the moon, Skibell presents us with the idea of storytelling and returning to Jewish culture. As Berger says: “Responding to the trauma of the Holocaust, Skibell’s novel embraces the cosmos of stories and folklore which, by utilizing the supernatural, defies at least momentarily the murder of the Jewish people and the indifference of the world” (Berger 155). It can be argued that the use of Jewish culture, myths and folklore enables Skibell to employ the supernatural so that he can defy the anti-Semitic attitude of people, make the Jewish people more powerful than their oppressors, and thus present us with a subversive version of the events of the Holocaust. Resorting to religious stories and folklore also enables Chaim to confront the Holocaust and its cruelty, and to advocate an alternative world free from violence and oppression.

[7] Conclusion

In the novel, Skibell brings Chaim and other dead Jews back to life, and thus allows them to tell the whole world about the atrocities committed against them. I have demonstrated the necessity of an empathetic listener and/or reader in the process of healing, and the significance of fantasy, particularly magical realism, in the act of remembering. By recreating the reality of the Holocaust, magical realism enables Skibell to remember the forgotten souls, to show the unimaginable atrocities of the genocide and the injustice done to Jews, to give voices to those who can no longer speak, to recover a family story out of heavy silence and horrible grief, to access and reconstruct a past he has never had any direct access to, and, most importantly, to revive his great-grandfather.

[Notes]

¹ The ‘Mayse-Bukh’, which was printed in 1602, is a collection of “*agadot* [tales] from the Talmud and the Mishnah” and Yiddish tales, legends and ancient myths of European Jews which are transmitted orally (Starck-Adler 156).

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[Address]

*East West University
A/2 Jahurul Islam Avenue
Jahurul Islam City, Aftabnagar
Dhaka-1212
Bangladesh
sabdullah@ewubd.edu*

Md Abu Shahid Abdullah completed his PhD at Otto-Friedrich University Bamberg, Germany in 2019. He also completed his MA in English and American Studies at the same university in 2014, including one exchange semester at Karl-Franzens University, Graz, Austria. In his PhD project, he focused on the affiliation between magical realism and historical trauma (the Holocaust, apartheid and slavery). Dr. Abdullah also taught two undergraduate seminars at Bamberg. Currently, he is working as an Assistant Professor in English at East West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.