

The Context and Usage of Cuss Words in Markus Zusak's Underdogs: A Linguistic and Cultural Examination

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Abstract

This paper delves into the context and usage of cuss words in Markus Zusak's trilogy named "Underdogs", providing a comprehensive linguistic and cultural examination. From the trilogy, the two novels *The Underdogs* and *Getting the Girl* are taken here for the study. Through an analysis of the language of the characters, this study explores the functions of the cuss words within the narrative to convey authenticity, emotional intensity, and social dynamics. By situating Zusak's work within the broader framework of literary studies, this research highlights the role of explicit language in reflecting and shaping cultural attitudes and personal identities. Furthermore, the paper discusses the usage of cuss words in English language through literary works in addressing both the challenges and opportunities it presents. The findings may suggest that, when contextualized cuss words can enhance learners' use of understanding real-world language, cultural nuances, and the complexities of human expression. The arena this paper concentrates is the designs that are based on the familial and social norms that result in helping certain groups of people to lead ordinary life even with its improper words of speech. The theme of this article is to notice the impression on people who have to deal with those applications by the culture. The language of the people who use cuss words is the best source for understanding their culture only where linguistic studies expand its best use of learning.

Keywords: Cuss Words, Language and Literature, Culture and Proper and Improper Words

Cuss Words, according to Merriam-Webster, is a "term of abuse: a derogatory term" that has been in usage by people from all walks of life. As words are the integral parts of language, cuss words or swear words also have importance. The study of language directly involves words as they are the keys in learning. A mirror that reflects the different shades of lives is literature. Literature is passing out of one's experience and expressions to the next generation using language as a medium. Literature is multifaceted that not only showcases artistic expression but also serves a cultural expression.

The true emotions and thoughts of mankind can be facilitated through literature. On the other hand, language makes the literature much more understandable. By integrating literature into English Language Teaching, the facilitation can harness these artistic expressions to enhance the learners' linguistic ability while simultaneously their cultural understanding. The union of language and literature not only fosters a greater appreciation for the art of conversing or narrating but also develops critical thinking, empathy and awareness of the world. Literature develops critical understanding and comprehension skills. The learning to analyze, interpret texts, identify themes, symbols, and underlying messages encourages higher-order thinking and improves the ability to get in-depth meaning from complexities.

The language through literature seems to be the conservative way of learning a language as the modern ways provide the easiest grounds for the learners. Words, in language, help for the finest of its use when it comes to language learning by adding refinements. As literature is transferring one's experience through language, it takes major responsibility in the usage of language. When the writer handles language to translate his dreams, the shape of the language is handled sensitively. It is only possible for the sensitive individual to transform as a literary writer, therefore his writings also exhibit

his sensitivity. Though the sensitive handling of the language works within the boundaries created by the writer, it does not fail to remark the lives he represents in his writing.

The effective understanding of the language needs something beyond the language like its etymology, culture and usage. The modern technicalities help the learners to survive with the language but not to become effective. The excellent usage of language never comes from surface learning. Hence, when literature takes place, learning a language becomes effective and sensitive because the stage called beyond is literature.

Literature represents people and their culture. The speakers of the language, most probably, are the characters of literary texts. Understanding of the speech and the speakers is fundamental and that comes with the cultural reflection in literature. When the culture of the speakers becomes known, the emotions behind their speeches become well-known. So, language can be efficiently learnt when the cultural and environmental spaces of the speaker are under study. The learning of the natural language users without the cultural understanding is mere sounds.

Culture is directly related to beliefs and practices like religion, love, food habits, attire, and language. Cuss words or swear words are the words that are in use by those who consciously or unconsciously practice it. In colloquial use, dirty words direct bodily and behavioral means of humans. The usage of that sort of words against others has social causes. Either it is used by the superiors against inferiors or inferiors against superiors. The issue between the inferior and superior people is the social cause and the language use of the ones who speak cuss words has different reasons.

The swear words, commonly known as "cuss words," evoke strong emotional reactions from individuals across different cultures and social settings. These words carry a potent emotional charge, often used to express intense feelings such as anger and frustration. The reactions to cuss words are deeply intertwined with cultural norms and personal beliefs, shaping perceptions of what is considered offensive or unacceptable. For some, swearing may be a taboo, viewed as disrespectful or inappropriate in polite discourse. In contrast, others may see it as a natural and expressive part of language, especially in informal or colloquial settings. The emotional response to swear words reflects a complex interplay of societal values, personal upbringing, and the situational context in which language is used, highlighting the diverse ways in which language can evoke and convey emotions.

In the trilogy of Markus Zusak's *Underdogs*, the characters are the ones who are taken for this study. They have been brought up in an environment using cuss words not as a big deal. Even for the daily act like eating, the characters use statements like "'Bloody mushrooms again,' I said as we walked out onto the street. 'Yeah', Rube smirked. 'Just drown 'em in tomato sauce again so you can't taste 'em. Bloody oath'" (TU 5). The brothers jovially use illogical jokes against themselves to defame each other playfully, like,

Go sniff it, he said, 'and tell me it doesn't smell like Steve's pyjamas.'

Steve's pyjamas?

'Yeah,'

My pyjamas don't stink.' Steve glared.

'Mine do,' I said. It was a joke. (TU 62)

When it becomes a practice, the characters replicate those words even outside of their home without much hesitation on others. They ruthlessly are able to mention their opposite gender without respect. It is mentioned in the text as “Oi, Rube whispered to her, really quiet. He was making sure only I could hear him. ‘Oi...This is a holdup.’ She didn’t hear. Stupid bloody cow.” (TU 7). The society also becomes the source of ill mindedness where cuss words become the byproducts of the crooked system. The protagonist who is a loner observes the society through which he takes the obscene casually. Zusak tries to prove through his words, for example, “I see... cars, road, pole, white line. . . disco, live girls, Calvin Klein billboard with woman and man in underwear. . .”(TU 99) that also rejuvenates the characters to lead themselves towards cuss words.

In *The Underdog*, the protagonist gets his questions solved through his dreams. Even in his dreams, he receives people with the same kind of approach, “Earlier on, they yelled out to this guy named Harris, ‘Oi, Harris! Show us y’ bald spot! Harris, y’ dirty boy!’” (36).

The society and family create an environment for the characters where the usage of cuss words is not at all an issue. So, the characters use it for others firstly on whom they don’t like. Cam, the protagonist in the novel *Getting the Girl* uses cuss words against the recent girlfriend of his brother as “Julia was, of course, an absolute scrubber. There’s not a whole lot more I can say about her. A scrubber (in case you don’t know) is a girl who might be described as kind of slutty or feisty, yet still without being a complete prostitute or anything like that” (GTG 73). The same example is found in *Getting the Girl* where Rube slut shames the romantic interest of Cam because he thinks that she is not the right one for his brother. It is in the text as “It’s that Stephanie girl.’ ‘The bitch,’ Rube spat” (GTG 16).

Contrarily, when the same happens in *The Underdog* where Cam’s sister is cheated by her boyfriend, he uses cuss words in conversation with his brother Rube as “You’re like a Chihuahua and Patterson’s built like a brick bloody shithouse” (TU 114) but it is understood that Rube belittles his brother to motivate him. That is completely a concern.

For the characters, it becomes a piece of comfort and they use it against others when they are with their comfortable people. Sarah, the sister of the protagonist, uses cuss words against the womanizers when she is with Cam “‘Friggin’ perverts,’ She said” (GTG53). A serious issue that has been developing is, they start using ill-mannered words against their own family members. There is no such negative intention in their usage but they use it out of concern or for mockery. Rube in *The Underdog* calls his brother Cam as Bastard; “I seen you, Y’ dirty little bastard” (TU 9). But nobody amongst the both takes it personally. In the book *Getting the Girl*, the brothers fight against one another for the girl Octavia where Sarah uses the same word, “‘Bastard!’ she yelled and threw the bucket at Rube” (GTG 153). Sylvia Plath employs similar language in her work, as exemplified by the line “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” from her poem *Daddy*.

Words harm people and obviously cuss words. In some occasions the characters don’t take the cuss words personally and those words don’t affect them. But, when the words are used against their inferiority complex, it harms them just because it makes them much weaker. Rube, one of the brothers of Cam used the word ‘Bastard’ against him so many times and Cam never felt bad for it. But at times when he receives the same words against his inferiority or pain, those words affect him so much. “You are a bit of a lonely bastard, aren’t y’?” (GTG16) is the casual statement of Rube against Cam. Cam feels extremely painful not because of the word ‘Bastard’ but for the word ‘lonely bastard’. He feels helpless to be told by his own brother that he is a loner. “A bit of a lonely bastard. A bit of a lonely bastard.

Rube's statement reverberated inside me till his voice was like hammer" (GTG 17). In the novel *The Underdog*, he felt the same pain when he is called 'grot' by his brother "A grot. A grot! It was true... 'Y' grot,' I called myself" (TU 19). When characters use cuss words against themselves, it does not signify self-hatred. Rather, it is a means to defy others' perceptions and assert to themselves and others that they are not inferior. For instance, in Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation*, the speaker uses sarcasm and self-deprecating humor when he says, "Foolishly, madam - by sitting down, has turned / My bottom raven black -". This undermines the landlady's prejudices and affirms his dignity and intelligence, countering the demeaning assumption that his skin color makes him inferior.

The tension in mind that is from the cuss words leads the characters to accept that they are the unwanted rogues for the society. Over the period of time, they started thinking that others may also think about them negatively. Cam when he analyses himself, he thinks, Faggot. Poofter. Wanker.

These are the common words in my neighbourhood when someone wants to give you some, tell you off, or just plain humiliate you. They'll also call you one of those things if you show some sign that you're in some way different from the regular, run-of-the-mill sort of guy who lives in this part of the city. (GTG 33)

This feeling gets developed even in times where nobody actually shames him. This literally becomes a fear within him. "Immediately, I threw the magazine back to the table, face-down so the barber wouldn't know right away what pervert I am" (GTG 35) is the statement that shows his developed form of fear. As his elder brother Steve used to call him a loser, he thinks that his girlfriend Sal will also think about him negatively. "Her expression seemed to throw words down to me. Words like; Loser, Dirty little bastard" (GTG 132). The reasons and reactions are naturally from the poor economical state and social condition of the protagonist and other characters. Whenever any ill word is used by some against others, the characters get involved into the context and try to find meaning or some joy out of the usage. This is not their actual characterization at the beginning but which is developed only in the process of using cuss words. Cam assumes the practicality of the emotional statements of his sister Sarah that "'Friggin' perverts,' She said" (GTG 53), and starts analysing it and continues saying, "Which gave me hope. The thing is, I think we're all perverts. All men. All women. All disgruntled little bastards like me. It is funny to think of my father as a pervert, or my mother" (GTG 53), because that justifies what he does to the girl he likes.

Finally, the way they treat their loved ones also in the form of casual usage cuss words. They completely track down from the normal approach. Rube likes the neighbourhood dog, Miffy, but he mentions it in his words "'Bloody hell, Cam, Rube laughed. 'What are y' trying to do to the poor little bastard? He's gaggin' on it'" (GTG 45). The protagonist Cam also likes the dog so much but they can't even speak good words for its funeral and that is how they are conditioned to the verbal usage.

He said, 'Miffy- you were undoubtedly a pathetic individual. I hated you, loved you, and wore a hood on my head so no one saw me with you. It's been a pleasure.' He gave him a final pat on the dog's head. 'now, I am leavin',' he pointed out. 'just because you had the nerve to die under your close line in the middle of what was practically a hurricane, I'm not about to get pneumonia because of it. So goodbye. (GTG 184).

But the close witness of the cuss word speakers gives the reasons when the inferior ones use those words against the superiors; that is the last weapon that they can escape from the harsh reality.

The cuss words are the weapons of the helpless people when the society and judiciary fail to lift them up. They use those harsh words in or off the premises of the superiors to keep their hope alive. Simultaneously the considerations have to be on people where they permit others to use cuss words against them. They have no much regrets or guilt to be on the receiving end.

In cases, the speakers speak those words against themselves. The reasons why they use those words against themselves are they contextually understand their potential and accept their social and economic state. The helpless and hopeless situation is understood by the users to use it against themselves or on their own family members. In novels, these swear words are strategically employed by authors to add realism to dialogue, convey the emotional intensity of characters, or depict specific social contexts. Their meanings are nuanced and contingent upon the character's personality, the setting of the story, and the author's intention to provoke authenticity or elicit specific reader responses.

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