



# The Silence of Survival: Subaltern Humanity and the Fragile Voices in Władysław Szpilman's The Pianist

Bhuvnesh Swami

Assistant Professor of English, Government College, Phalodi, Rajasthan



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## Abstract

*This text discusses the theme of survival and the complex articulation of subaltern humanity in Władysław Szpilman's *The Pianist*. This story represents a record of historical trauma, with silence not only meant as the absence of speech but as a multilayered refusal of acceptance in relation to the systemic oppression. Szpilman's experiences over the course of the holocaust demonstrate how music can be a mode of resistance and vital nourishment to the author for his dignity and humanity against dehumanization, brutality and loss. His account underscores how subaltern people resist and navigate structures of power through their literary expressions and thus survival constitutes both as an ongoing struggle and statement of agency. This paper focuses more on Szpilman's account, while considering comparative remarks from writings of Solomon Northup & Malcolm X. These works narrate struggles against slavery and racism, accounts of experiences of minority voices, civil rights struggles and Holocaust narratives. This research draws on postcolonial and Marxist lenses to emphasize how voices that have been silenced and made invisible but still resonates through survival narratives and live into collective memory. Overall this research shows how art, testimony and resistance all work together to provide fragile voices, strength to endure and acknowledge their historical significance.*

**Keywords:** survival, subaltern humanity, Władysław Szpilman, the pianist, silence, resistance, identity, holocaust

## Introduction

The Holocaust is one of the most devastating incidents in recent history, which epitomised violence, oppression and dehumanisation. It raised major ethical, psychological and existential dilemma and even the limits of human tolerance. Władysław Szpilman in his novel *The Pianist* creates an exceptionally personal story of survival on the occupied Polish territory around the time of Warsaw being under Nazi occupation where he not only tells about his struggle against hunger, violence and the inherent risks with death but also encompasses the greater experiences of the subaltern humanity otherwise not heard due to lack of voice. As Szpilman shows, the survival was not only matter of life and death but of moral, cultural and even symbolic issues, being dependent on the ability to keep silent, power of music and literature as means of

resistance and establishing claim to dignity. Survival in Auschwitz by Levi et al. (1996) has brought particular emphasis on the psychological survival tactics that upheld moral honor, and Night by Elie Wiesel (Astro2014) has made stress on trauma, moral choices and bargaining over identities in the face of dehumanizing conditions. Carrying such arguments along, Felman et al.(1992) advanced the analysis of narrative silence as a means of expression of trauma, in which unverbalized experiences require ethical spectatorship on the part of readers.

The subaltern theory by Gayatri Spivak (2023) will also be used in this study since it works on the notion that the subordinate group is silenced by the noise of the dominant. Music served to act as literal and symbolic opposition, as it kept Szpilman alive, confirmed self-identity, and further survival in opposition allowing the transmission of resiliency



in the face of repression. A cross comparison of the works of Solomon Northup of *Twelve Years a Slave* and Malcolm X of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* depicts the universality of the subaltern survival and resistance to the structural oppression. Placing Szpilman in the same context with these accounts, the research draws the ideas into the questions of ethics and histories involving the survival, resistance and horrific human experiences that occur on the margins.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework developed for this study was primarily founded on postcolonial theory, Marxist theory and the idea of the subaltern. These theories were applied to consider how Władysław Szpilman's *The Pianist* articulated the themes of survival, resistance and the claim to raise voice from the margins in the face of systemic oppression. Thus, this study developed a framework focusing on the methods in which silence, cultural expression and subaltern agency function in Holocaust narratives and within contemporary contexts like slavery and racial marginalization.

### Subaltern Theory

Spivak defined the concept of the subaltern and this construction of the subaltern offered a framework with which to deal with local people power struggles and subaltern on one hand and the manner in which individuals can represent themselves on the other hand. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak reasoned that the subaltern voice was frequently inadmissible in a dominant historical, political and social discourse, and when filtered through these discourses, the subaltern voice was apt to be disrupted or perhaps silenced itself. This theory was especially valuable when analysing the works of Władysław Szpilman's *The Pianist* that not only described the experiences of the author as a Jewish survivor of Nazi oppression, but also highlighted other minor figures, whose life was barely ever brought to the light of historical records. In the autobiography of Szpilman, the subaltern were also the neighbours who offered help, the senior citizens and young children who went through the most severe forms of deprivation and the non-jew who

helped by offering food or shelter incurring risks to their own lives. Though insignificant in figurative terms, these characters portrayed the moral agency, ethical participation and types of resistances to the system of structural oppression. Subaltern figures in the memoir were often represented through silence, gestures or anything little enough at the point of being not noted at all, nonetheless with ethics and symbolic weight. By employing the subaltern theory, the paper has illustrated the Holocaust survival stories as elaborate expression of agency, resilience and resistance against system of oppression, which aim to deny them their own existence .

### Narratives of Silence and Trauma

The sense of silence has prevailed in the Holocaust and postcolonial studies and served as a survival strategy and narrative tool. Using the studies of Felman and Laub (1992), one can conclude that silence in testimony is an expression of trauma that is so extreme, so personal that it cannot be spoken directly. Such reticence was not purely the absence of words, but active expression, demanding moral and imaginative reflections on the part of readers. In *The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman the silence has many layers. He saw suffering children, old people and neighbours and could not do anything about it. The silence was expressions of moral tension and structural helplessness which do not just imply a state of being silent. Silence here also overlapped with symbolic expression in terms of music. Szpilman used the piano playing as a sort of vocalization of sense of self, dignity and humanity. The literal and symbolic forms were combined in the memoir to explain how trauma could have been mediated and communicated, through music making sure that subaltern voices were neither silenced ethically nor historically despite the oppressive situations.

### Marxist Perspectives

The structural and systemic aspects of the oppression in Wladyslaw Szpilman's *The Pianist* can be discussed with the help of the Marxist theory. Marxist theorists believed the human freedom or agency was curbed due to the existence of social, economic and political structures that produced inequalities and survival conditions. Applying this view to the discussion of Holocaust narratives, the creation of structural



violence through the bureaucratic, militaristic and ideological systems by the Nazis demeaned Jewish communities. Other action like obtaining food secretly or sheltering in abandoned structures demonstrated the ways in which the subaltern subjects enacted their contact and in some cases triumphed against structural oppression. The moral and social aspects of relationships with the helpers and other characters were also revealed through the critique of Marxism, as the acts of such characters involved the nurturing of food, shelter or information, which embodied the agentive relationality within the limiting conditions. The story of Szpilman demonstrates that survival and resistance could not be reduced to individualism, as some people saw it within the social networks and material background. The structural violence acted as direct brutality as well as a bureaucratic process like ghettoization, forced labour, and deportation to show that the process of oppression was systematic. Comparative study from Solomon Northup and Malcolm X exemplified the exercise of agency and ethical resistance by subaltern subjects to slavery and racial oppression and thus relevance of the Marxist views comes into light across the domains of systemic control and injustice.

### Methodology

The present research was conducted using a qualitative research design to examine *The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman, specifically how the author conveyed survival, subaltern humanity and resistance in terms of silence and music. The main methods that were used in the research consist of textual and thematic analysis, the close reading of the memoir, revealing certain patterns, storytelling strategies and the emerging marginal voices. The theoretical frameworks followed in the analysis included postcolonial and Marxist approach where much focus is paid to the thread of subaltern agency, structural oppression and ethics. The study also includes the comparative approach, which intertwines the ideas expressed in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* and Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. These readings offered cross-historical reference points with the interpretation of how subaltern subjects negotiated systemic violence, performed agency and found voice in various

historical and socio-political contexts. The process consisted of reading the primary material carefully and taking notes of the passages that touched upon the topics of silence, music and survival. By incorporating close reading with theoretical analysis, the research sought to illuminate how narratives of survival helped marginalized individuals to survive in ways that can be considered act of resistance and moral assertion.

### Analysis and Discussion

The discussion of *The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman demonstrates the complexity of relationships between survival, subaltern humanity and resistance in the global face of institutionalized repression. The paper explores the memoir relying on postcolonial theories, subaltern studies, Marxism, notion of silence, music and ethical agency as a dynamics of resilience and narrative assertion. The will of survival and moral context as experienced by Szpilman also makes clear the position that human endurance depends on the skills with which one manages to fight structural violence and still preserves dignity and an awareness of what is right and wrong.

### Survival and Subaltern Agency

Szpilman pieced together a multidimensional narrative, where he states that survival is not only about underlying resilience and durability, but also agency of subalterns. He is able to use the tactical disguising, keen observation and judicious interactions which underline the delicate balance of power in a foreign place. An example of such assessment is the fact that the capability of Szpilman to find temporary refuge in abandoned buildings and seek food in the hands of sympathetic people is an intentional participation in a restricted set of survival opportunities. All these were not only practical initiatives; they also represented moralized decision making and human interdependence. The neighbours, children and the aged as well as occasional helpers show some minor expression of defiance and moral agency which was historically down-swept by the mainstream accounts of the holocaust. Szpilman in his memoir traces his and other lives in the backdrop of World War 2 to recontextualize such muffled lives in the literary and historical continuum as one



of moral and social cuts on subaltern human lives. Compared to *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup, the book discusses parallels to the issue of subaltern agency in the context of slavery. Northup addressed the issue of survival through the shrewd negotiation of the hierarchical power structures, the conscientability to comply strategically and to have a selective agency of affirmation and identifications amid this harsh exploitation. Equally, the negotiations of the systemic racial oppression by Malcolm X as manifested in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* displays the issues of self-education, moral consciousness and pragmatic resistance as keys to survival as well as constructions of identity. These contexts proved that subaltern subjects were able to enshrine their existence despite being entrapped by the reign of violence.

### Silence as a Strategy and Narrative Device

The silence became an important strategy and a device of narration of Szpilman. The symbolic and ethical meanings of this enforced muteness of hiding and avoidance were not only practical everyday survival requirements but silence also acted as a mediator of trauma, so that Szpilman could watch the world around him endure suffering but in a morally and emotionally sound state. Silence in *The Pianist* was also somehow intertwined with symbolic modes of expression, especially that of music. The piano performance by Szpilman was, in that way, both a vocalization of his strength as well as his ingenuity, psychological nourishment during his time in the ghetto and a confirmation of his human dignity despite the dehumanization by the system. The juxtaposition of imposed silence and the articulatory quality of music highlight the multiple modes of resistance open to the disenfranchised subject, as despite the fact that the means of conventional expression have been suppressed, the voice of the subaltern can still be heard. On the same note, Northup also demonstrated here the power of discretion and selective talk as the means of survival in slavery (Whitfield 2024). His cautious interactions with enslavers and other forms of figures stressed those aspects of silence that were ethical and practical and echoed how minorities negotiated power structures. Malcolm X also is a brilliant example of an individual who initially faced

restrictions on expression and therefore found it necessary to observe and exercise strategic silence initially in order to understand the nature of the systemic oppression.

### Summary of Findings

The analysis revealed that the text of *The Pianist* by Szpilman presented a complex account of survival in the sense that it incorporated not only a physical ability to live but a moral strength, subaltern subjectivity and ethical testifying. Silence and music became dominant modes in which a dehumanizing regimen surfaced the forms of agency that marginalized subjects preserved, as well as forms of resistance they practiced and used to convey some aspects of trauma. Northup provided comparative perspectives to reveal the relevance of such approaches on the systemic oppressions regardless of their contexts. In general, the work showed how survival accounts can be related to acts of resistance by reclaiming subaltern humanhood and maintaining ethical and historical memory against structural violence.

### Conclusion

The paper has analysed *The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman to answer the question regarding how subaltern humanity, resistance and survival were articulated under systematic oppression. Szpilman was not simply recounting his personal experience of survival in the Holocaust, but was delivering a critically important document that had the ability to record the precariousness, moral agency and strife of the unrepresented individual. By examining not only the survival experiences of the author but also of those peripheral characters, the neighbours, children, the elderly and protagonists, offering assistance. The study reveals that survival not only involves a physical endurance but also an ethical, cultural and moral bargain of a dehumanizing system. The absence of speech and the presence of music became the main survival and resistance tool. Multiple forms and uses of silence played the role of self-preservation tool and a device to narrate the trauma, ethical presence and moral consideration. Comparisons made with Solomon Northup and Malcolm X further underscored how the subordinated found a way to act under slavery as well as racial



oppression. Through postcolonial, subaltern and Marxist critical lenses, it was revealed that survival narratives are forms of resistance, moral testimony and a service to collective memory. On the whole, it is possible to state that Szpilman uses his memoir to underline that the aspect of survival implies not only the persistence of the trauma but the resurgence, choice, and moral importance of lending a voice to the people who have been historically oppressed.

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