



Childhood at the Margins: Structures of Power, Violence, and Social Memory in Babel's *The Story of My Dovecote*

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Abstract— This paper is an interdisciplinary attempt at examining Russian author Isaac Babel's semi-autobiographical short story *The Story of My Dovecote* through a sociological-literary lens. It explores how literary representations of childhood can be used to address broader questions of identity and memory, especially shaped by structural violence and social exclusion. Diverging from romanticized depictions of innocence and youthful abandon associated with classical children's literature, Babel's narrative portrays childhood as a site of economic precarity, communal polarization, and fractured identity. By locating the narrative in the historical context of early 20th-century Russia and specifically the 1905 Odessa pogrom and Tsarist policies of marginalization, the paper aims to explore how education for the protagonist became symbolic of Russian Jews' broader aspiration for upward mobility. The paper argues that Babel's story underscores the enduring dynamics of systemic oppression, cultural resilience, and loss of innocence – while challenging dominant discourse casting children's literature as apolitical.



Keywords— Isaac Babel, children's literature, jewish literature, symbolic capital, systemic injustice

I. INTRODUCTION

While children's novels have traditionally been framed around themes of innocence, moral growth, and unambiguous resolutions of conflict, scholarship on the genre has highlighted a growing body of literature that subvert this idealized narrative, portraying childhood as a site of struggle, social conditioning, and systemic vulnerability (Nodelman, 2008; Goldstone, 1986). Critics argue that such works problematize dominant notions/portrayals of childhood as in fact being deeply entangled with cultural, political, and economic forces, where the child is not 'sheltered' from the world's inequities but is often a direct witness or victim of them.

This critical perspective allows us to bring into the fold literature that might not typically be seen as targeted at children, such as Isaac Babel's narratives, and how they can act as a proxy to understand how childhood is shaped and fractured by violent socio-political realities. Babel's *The Story of My Dovecote* stands out as one of his most haunting portrayals of systemic oppression and social exclusion destabilizing the perceived sanctity of childhood.

This paper approaches Babel's narrative through a sociological lens, examining how structures of power, communal memory, and the pursuit of symbolic capital shape the child-protagonist's subjectivity. By situating the text within the historical context of early 20th-century anti-Semitic violence, I argue that Babel's work reflects not only individual personal trauma but also larger historical patterns of oppression and resilience closely tied to minority experiences universally, be it in the West or the Global South.

II. PROBLEMATIZING CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETAL CONFLICT

Russian author Isaac Babel's semi-autobiographical opus "The Story of My Dovecote" explores the fragility of childhood amidst oppressive socio-political forces – centering fractured subjectivities and fleeting illusions of victory in a world characterized by structural inequalities and deep communal polarization. Rejecting the sentimental

and utopian framing of childhood as being apolitical often found in classical and mainstream contemporary children's literature, Babel introduces a world (not particularly different from the real one) where innocence is precarious and constantly overshadowed by violence and class antagonisms.

At the center is a nine-year-old Jewish boy, whose personal aspirations – symbolized by success in the Lycee examination, a competitive entrance test for secondary schooling – are entangled with the patriarchal ideals of 'duty' and 'responsibility,' reinforced by his community's belief that education and its attendant social capital offer protection against marginalization. Yet, as the pogroms that follow Tsar Nicholas II's "constitution" unfold, such aspirations are systemically rejected by the brutal realities of communal violence and dispossession.

Before beginning with a textual analysis, it is vital to read "My Dovecote" against the broader political and social dynamics of the time. Babel wrote *My Dovecote* in the 1920s, but as the critical biography *Babel in Context* notes, his narrative reflects the social memory of the 1904–1905 pogroms, capturing how anti-Semitic violence left deep psychological and generational scars. (Stanton, 2008). The October Manifesto of 17 October 1905 was proposed as Russia's first constitutional reform offering civil liberties and political representation, but once in motion, was followed by violent anti-Jewish pogroms. One of these pogroms, the Odessa pogrom of 18–22 October 1905, was one of the bloodiest in the Russian Empire – leaving over 400 Jews dead, thousands injured, and entire neighborhoods destroyed, with complicity from elements of the local police and the Black Hundred groups (Veidlinger, 2012).

In this paper, I argue that Babel's depiction of childhood in *My Dovecote* can be read as a sociological commentary on how violence, patriarchal expectations, and ethnic marginalization shape subjectivity. The protagonist's early life is stripped of the ordinary pleasures and carefree socialization that typically define childhood, replaced by the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) of unrelenting academic pressures and the overt structural violence targeting his Jewish identity. While academic success momentarily grants him a sense of agency, this agency is ultimately shown to be highly fragile, fragmenting under the weight of shared trauma and systemic persecution of his community.

The boy's experience parallels what Goffman (1963) identifies as the stigmatization of minority groups, where social identity is shaped and degraded by the constant imposition of external hostility and exclusion. Babel situates the child in a liminal space (Turner, 1969) where his identity is neither fully that of a child nor that of an

empowered individual, but rather a fractured construct forged through exclusion and psychic trauma. In effect, the narrative underscores how oppressive social structures and collective violence undermine both material and psychological health of communities as well as individuals, aligning with broader inquiries into how marginalized identities are formed and deformed under conditions of systemic oppression. (Friedman & Friedlander, 2005)

In line with Babel's centering of the child, this article examines the precarious formation of the child's consciousness within both parental/community and hostile socio-political structures that shape, constrain, and define his early years and life trajectory. From the outset, the narrator is thrust into the competitive field of education, where academic success functions as a scarce source of symbolic capital for the Jewish community within a hostile and exclusionary social hierarchy.

III. EDUCATION AND NARRATIVES OF LEGITIMACY AND MOBILITY

The grueling entrance examinations – where the protagonist competes with both Russian classmates and fellow Jews – reflects how early socialization for marginalized children is rooted in fighting or surviving in structures of exclusion and hierarchy. Thus, education serves as a site of both individual struggle and collective aspiration. (Dolbilov, 2006) The father of the protagonist, having led a passive and "unremarkable" life himself, projects his failed ambitions and the hope for the Jewish community's survival onto his son, reproducing the weight of historical and cultural trauma through familial expectations. His optimism contrasts with the mother's pragmatism – who is acutely aware of systemic hostility towards Jews in Russia – nevertheless both parents participate in the transmission of cultural and symbolic burdens, positioning the child as a representative of their community's future and their saviour from erasure and persecution.

In the narrative, the child becomes less a character and more a symbol of socio-economic upliftment and legitimacy, burdened with the task of redeeming the Jewish community from ethno-religious conflict following migration to Russia. This mythologizing of a nine-year-old is reinforced through biblical and rabbinic symbolism – especially the figure of the dove, which classical Jewish texts frequently align with Israel's national and spiritual condition. For example, in the Jewish Talmud, a passage called *Song of Songs Rabbah* explicitly likens the people of Israel to a dove (Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs 2:14), signaling their vulnerability and divine election (Neusner, 1990; Schwartz, 2012). Additionally, the Babylonian Talmud observes that "just as

the dove is only saved by her wings, so too Israel is preserved by the mitzvot" (Brachot 53b)

Making the dove the protagonist's coveted 'prize' is thus a deliberate choice, rather than the animal motif often present in children's literature. Through this, Babel layers the story with a mixture of social realism and mysticism that underlines the boy's journey. While the father's obsessive investment in his son's academic success pedestalizes the child, projecting onto him the unrealistic ideal of a saviour, the end result is crushing. Unlike the celebrated heroes of traditional narratives, this child is punished and scarred even after fulfilling these societal demands.

IV. IDENTITY, SELF-PRESERVATION AND SOCIAL POLARIZATION

Beyond his desire to own a dove, the story offers almost no insight into the boy's personal aspirations or social interests; what glimpses we do get come from scattered references to his classmates and the tense, competitive dynamic that defines his interactions with them. Such an environment fosters a kind of covert/subconscious hostility. This is shown as being weaponized and reinforced throughout the narrative in *My Dovecote* as shared feelings of jealousy and contempt are used by the community as means of bonding, especially in the face of external threats. This collective pride and envy is crystallized in the toast delivered by the elder Lieberman during the celebration of the boy's Lycee admission, where the child's success is not merely personal but presented as a triumph of community's resilience –

"In single combat: I had vanquished the Russian boys with their fat cheeks, and I had vanquished the sons of our own vulgar parvenus. So too in ancient times David King of Judah had overcome Goliath, and just as I had triumphed over Goliath, so too would our people by the strength of their intellect conquer the foes who had encircled us and were thirsting for our blood."

This monologue encapsulates a kind of socially sanctioned hostility, an emotionally-charged rhetoric that celebrates competition and exclusion while appealing to primal instincts. This braggadocious framing of rivalry mirrors broader cultural mechanisms through which violence and antagonism are normalized, perpetuating a mindset that is both survivalist and tribalistic. Given these circumstances, the child gets continually conditioned to perceiving his peers and classmates less as companions and more as adversaries.

The need for a social psychological approach to *My Dovecote*, alongside literary and sociological perspectives,

is salient. It correlates with evidence that suggests growing up in a marginalized community which adopts a defensive orientation toward the outside world has a detrimental impact on youth's psyche. (Nelson et al, 2024). The protagonist in the story, for example, remains alienated from non-academic social interactions, particularly the formative experience of building friendships. Such deprivation, though often overlooked, robs him of the opportunity to develop the interpersonal bonds and emotional ease that contribute to a cohesive sense of self.

In turn, his individuality and capacity for social connectedness become fractured, shaped by an environment that prizes competitive achievement over shared human connection.

Another crucial dimension of the child's consciousness in *My Dovecote* is rooted in his Jewish identity. Although Judaism is seldom mentioned or addressed directly, the socio-political implications of being Jewish in early 20th-century Russia loom large as sources of conflict. The child, consumed by academic rigor, avoids religious reflection, but his isolation, anxieties, and struggles are derived from the marginalization Jews faced under Tsarist rule, where institutionalized policies and periodic outbreaks of violence defined daily life (Engelstein, 2022). Some Russian teachers like Karavaev (tinged with anti-Semitism yet praising the child "for me and for Pushkin") and Pyatnitsky (who protects him from bullying by his peers) hint at a kind of "ambivalent inclusion."

Yet this limited recognition coincides with broader xenophobia, likely fostering conflicted emotions toward his own religion and Jewishness, shaped by burden of belonging and the need to prove his worth in a hostile society. Unlike typical Jewish initiation into adulthood through bar mitzvah, the child's abrupt encounter with Jewish identity comes not through faith education but via the brutal reality of pogroms. It is an initiation marked by violence, loss, and a collapse of innocence.

The child's relationship with Russia and its ruling apparatus, which forms the geographical and political backdrop of *My Dovecote*, is also important to dissect. The state holds oppressive influence through cultural barriers and by limiting access to education via the numerus clausus – a Tsarist-era quota introduced in 1887 that capped Jewish admission to secondary schools. (Bartal, 2005) Coupled with widespread vilification fueled by ethno-religious prejudice, such restrictions placed the child – and his community – in a position of structural vulnerability. Yet Babel gives the child a subtler inner life: he studies Russian literature diligently and harbours no overt resentment toward Russians, even as his surroundings deny him. The downfall, thus, begins not with bias towards classmates but

from internal corruption: when the grain dealer Khariton Efrussi secures his own son's admission over the hardworking protagonist, the child's belief in meritocracy is shattered.

V. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the brutal killing of the dove and the sight of his granduncle's lifeless body push the child into an abyss of grief and confusion. The world he thought he knew collapses, revealing a distorted and blood-laden reality. This moment marks a profound turning point – a complete deconstruction of his retrospectively naïve perceptions of life, community, and belonging. The allure of meritocratic progress through education is thus rendered hollow when systemic violence, sanctioned by the very state that promises reform, brutally invisibilizes the lived realities of marginalized communities.

Babel underscores the deep irony of seeking acceptance from a society politically, structurally incapable of granting it – a society steeped in ethno-religious prejudice, propagated by decades of propaganda and systemic inequality. These inequalities, along with government corruption and political turbulence, have historically conditioned native populations to blame foreign, culturally distinct communities competing for limited resources – often culminating in civil wars and pogroms, as portrayed in the short story. (Grosfeld, Sakalli, & Zhuravskaya, 2019)

For the child, this reality produces a form of cognitive dissonance: his hopes for academic success – tied to something as innocent as acquiring doves – become entangled with the broader community aspirations. Yet these aspirations depend on acceptance into the very totalitarian structure that marginalizes them; such exclusion is central to maintaining power and order by the elites. The socio-political upheavals in the wake of Tsar Nicholas II's constitution open a void in which previously suppressed bigotry, resentment, and reactionary violence implode into public life. Babel captures how these forces manifest in raw expressions of anger, particularly against vulnerable groups.

While adult perspectives on war are often numbed by the monotony of survival, Babel sidesteps this detached lens by centering a child. Through the child's unconditioned gaze, he illuminates the grotesque absurdity of violence, where life and death collapse into a disturbingly human experience.

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