

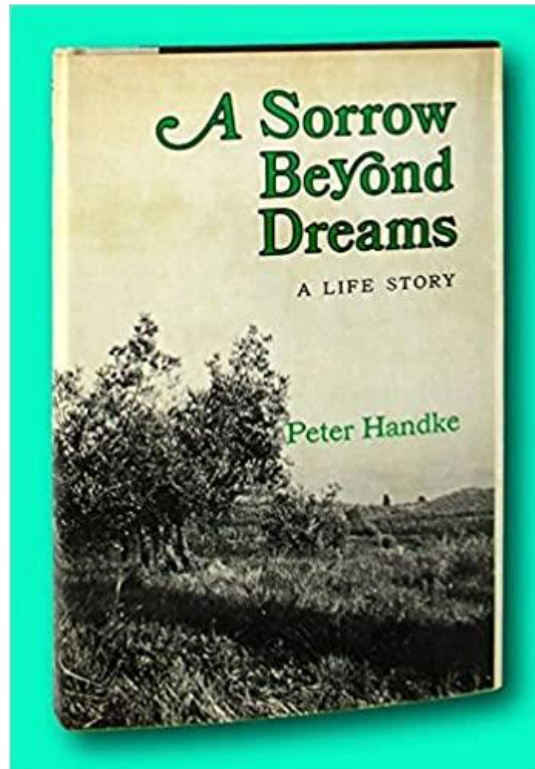
## Representation of Mother's Death in Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*

**Musaib Junejo**

M.Phil. Scholar University of Sindh, Jamshoro  
[musaib.junejo@scholars.usindh.edu.pk](mailto:musaib.junejo@scholars.usindh.edu.pk)

---

---



Courtesy: [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper aims at representing the mother's death in Peter Handke's novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* written in 1972. The novel is semi-autobiographical which depicts his own mother's suicide and death and is considered as one of his finest works. Handke has used imagination, dialogues, thoughts, emotions and description of characters and events as real events and they are shown as historical fiction. Throughout the novel Handke has portrayed the story of his mother's life and death which starts in a small village of Austria, where women's lives are full of poverty and hopelessness. Handke through a statement for his mother: "a girl's future was a joke" shows his mother's later experiences: like her marriage without love, her broken dreams, and her life in a society where her true feelings and personality are denied by people of society.

On one hand, Handke shows the repression and hopelessness of women in Austria, and on the other hand he shows the strong and courageous side of women. When his mother leaves her home at the age of 15 to pursue her career, she tries to be free from repression courageously, illegally crosses the borders, reads literature, and involves herself in politics, after all she suffers from a psychological illness and calmly commits suicide which is the actual purpose of Handke behind writing *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. This paper explores women's empowerment through the life of Handke's mother and women's sufferings and death through the death of Handke's mother in his finest novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*.

**Keywords:** Peter Handke, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, Mother's Death, empowerment, sufferings and struggles of women.

### **Introduction**

The lives of women in Austria were full of poverty and hopelessness. They were always suppressed, repressed and neglected by society, their feelings, emotions and personality were also neglected by society for which women's future and career was a joke, they were bound in a loveless marriage, their dreams were shattered and their life was dominated by a forceful society. Though there were some women like Peter Handke's mother who bravely tried to break the norms and customs of society. In order to pursue their career they left their home at very young age and involved themselves in politics as well but their struggles were also shattered by their psychological disturbance because of the pressures of society which brought them to end their life. They were affected by the relationship between the pressures of society and their own psychological disturbance when social and political pressures brought depression, fear, rigidity and self-blame in them.

The life, struggles and death of Austrian women are depicted by Peter Handke in his finest work *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* in which he has represented his own mother's life and death story through the character of an old woman who at the age of 51 commits suicide, though he has not used the name of her mother as well as the woman's character, he has shown the character by using "She" but it clearly represents the whole life and death story of his own mother who also commits suicide after struggling a lot. So, the novel is known as semi-autobiographical and is considered as one of his finest works by some critics.

The story of Handke's mother starts in a small village of Austria and ends at her death. Through a phrase "a girl's future was a joke" Handke shows his mother's experiences like she was involved in a loveless marriage, her dreams were shattered and she was living in a domain. society where her true feelings, emotions and personality were neglected by her society. Though she leaves her home at the age of 15 to escape from these sufferings and norms of society and to pursue her career, she involves herself in illegal acts like crossing the borders to move from

Germany to Austria and also involves in politics, but she follows a mental illness because of the pressures of her society and at the end she commits suicide to end her life.

*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is not only the memory of Handke's mother but it depicts the sufferings and struggles of all women of Austria who face many problems in their society. To do anything independently is not allowed to them and if they dare to do it they suffer from the emotional and psychological problems by the pressures of society which lead them to end their life calmly.

This paper analyses the representation of mother's death in Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* in which he has portrayed the life and death of 51 years old woman that represents the life and death story of his own mother. This research attempts to answer the question: How has Peter Handke represented his mother's death in his finest novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*?

### **Literature Review**

Literature review is a data or relevant studies that have been done by previous writers on the research topic. It is a search and assessment of the obtainable literature in chosen topic. In this literature review I have discussed *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* by Peter Handke memoir, suffering and politics, and relevant studies on the representation of mother's death in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. This literature review also identifies the gap that needs to be fulfilled in this type of research.

### **Memoir, Suffering and Politics in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams***

The novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* depicts the border between Austria and Yugoslavia where Handke along with his mother grew up as minority slovenes. There sufferings, poverty and patriarchy lead a woman to commit suicide and this tragedy forces Handke to write this book as a memoir as well as memorial. Handke's mother Maria was born into poor and serfdom conditions, where women were sentenced to live depressing and unimportant lives, whole importance was given to boys and girls' future and career was a joke for them this was the reason that her father allowed her for only elementary education which the daughter deserved in Austria. She found to maintain herself in these conditions very difficult and failed so she left her parents' home to make her own career and future and to fulfill her dreams. But her struggles ended soon when she became pregnant and was forced to marry an alcoholic soldier whom she didn't love.

Later Handke feels guilty and explains that how his illegitimate birth led his mother to live a life with joyless duty, beatings and abortions. He believes that these are the facts through which violence emerges in this moral world and he criticizes those literary traditions which

cause the sufferings of women. Maria in order to get freedom from this forceful and dominated life by society committed suicide at the age of 51 in her parents' home where she was born just because she believed that it is only death which can free her from all these sufferings. Handke mourns the Slobodan Milosevic more than his mother because when the Serbian leader died he gave speech on his funeral and through this speech he expressed his grief and sorrow on the death of Serbian leader.

Handke's ability and skills of art contrast his sense of politics he believes on art and imagination and opposes the politics because it stops people to worry about their individuality and freedom of life like his mother who found freedom after her death. According to Handke art praises freedom and personal liberty from the rules of society which bind women to pursue their liberty, there woman's life was divided into stations like "Tired, Exausted, Sick, Dying, Dead" and Handke's mother had to live with this stereotype.

Handke believes that it is only art not politics, which releases humans from mental captivity, and it enlarges the imaginative power in them. The tragedy of his mother was that she only knew about the equality of being a woman and a wife nothing more than that and after suffering a lot by this belief she committed suicide to end her life and sufferings of women are by politics and his writings clearly depict his beliefs on art and politics.

### **Relevant Studies On Representation of Mother's Death in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams***

Atay (2019) in his research writes that Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is his autobiography which is based on his mother's suicide Handke has written the memories of his mother in the novel and he started writing this novel after seven weeks of his mother's death.

The novel is not limited to his sorrow of his mother's death but by telling the story of his mother who observed the second world war and Nazi regime he also explains the history and trauma of an Austrian village and his own sufferings as well. Handke's novel clearly depicts his concept of his mother's suicide and the Second World War's terrible effects on his mother. However the novel represents the death with both psychological and historical perspective which lead us to comment on two important sides of Handke's work. These two sides represent his mother's suicide and his questions of history, and the novel suggests Handke's understanding of writing and reading literature, as well as his concept of death and its mourning, it also explores the mourning and effects of someone's death who is very close like one's mother's suicide and death is narrated by a detached narrator.

The novel begins with the news of an old woman's death in a newspaper: In a small village of Austria a 51 year old woman commits suicide to end her life and sufferings she takes extra dose of sleeping pills and dies. She represents the life and death story of Handke's mother. At

her young age his mother was not allowed to pursue higher education so she left home to pursue her career at the age of 15, soon she moved into a new environment and new world. She witnessed the Second World War and during the war she met with a married man and fell in love with him, soon she became pregnant and married to another man to whom she didn't want to marry. After Peter she had two more children and aborted three, her life was full of sufferings and beatings. In 1948 she returned back to Austria in her parents' home from where she used to run and avoid the repressed environment, once again she was trapped in same depressed village life. Her husband was a drunkard and they were living in very poor conditions. She struggled a lot to get freedom from all sufferings, read literature, gave much time to family and home life but found herself failed and suffered from a psychological illness that lead her to end her life and to free herself from everything by committing suicide. Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* aims to explore death, suffering, mourning and history of the people of Austria and it focuses on the lives of Austrian women because the novel explores the life and death story of Handke's mother who also belonged to Austria. The novel shows the history, life, sufferings and death of Handke's mother as well as his mourning for his mother's death.

Walsh (2013) writes in his paper that Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is a life story, his mother's biography which is written after his mother's death by committing suicide and in it Handke depicts the portrait of his mother and her life and death through a woman's character whom he calls "She" throughout the novel as well as by giving the time and place where she used to live: the fearful place of Austria and Germany where her life was full of poverty, fear and hopelessness. Handke wrote this novel in 1972 soon after the death of his mother in which he explains his sorrow for his mother's death by saying that his mother has died for seven weeks and at her funeral he realized that he could write better before his need of writing about his mother because he found himself speechless while reacting on his mother's suicide news, and he sometimes feels that his need of writing about his mother is so blur and unclear so he wishes that if he didn't work at it. He feels that his work is not clearly transcribed which always shows the danger of artifice. The language doesn't have the meaning in the story but it also remains clear and unmistakable. He gathers the pieces of memories of his mother's life to make a biography that should be enough to remember a lost person.

The novel deals with the horror of Handke's mother's death which she experienced at the time of her suicide, and he feels proud that she didn't die with peace but with a horror on her face by committing suicide. At the same time he feels himself unable to overcome from her death and also feels speechlessness. The novel also deals with the social, political and cultural boundaries on women of Austria, his mother's conditions of poverty and hopelessness, her broken dreams and expectations, her lack of education by parents and society and her struggles to pursue her own career and to live a life with freedom and sense of individuality. According to Handke her personal feelings and emotions were denied and neglected by her parents and society and after

leaving her home they were also neglected by her husband. She left her parents' home to live her life independently but after being pregnant she was forced to marry an alcoholic soldier, she was bound in a loveless marriage and a joyless duty and was also dominated again by her husband. Her life was full of poverty and hopelessness again and her raised sufferings forced her to return to her village Austria. After coming back in Austria she was suffering with same conditions like poverty and hopelessness and found her efforts failed, she realized that she is nothing for herself, she learnt that she cannot improve her future now. After suffering and struggling a lot she found her freedom and liberty only in death and Handke has given it the term a "free-death. At the age of 51 she committed suicide to end her sufferings and life and to get freedom from these sufferings in the same home where she was born. She ended her life by her own hands and left the horror and grief for Handke. He wrote this novel to become free from his sorrow on his mother's death but he explains that writing this work on her memories was not enough for him to make himself free from his sorrow and fear.

### **Identification of Research Gap**

These above studies have discussed the representation of the mother's death in Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. The novel is a biography of Handke's mother, it depicts the life and death story of his mother. In the novel Handke has portrayed a woman's character who commits suicide at the age of 51 same like his mother and this character represents the suicide and death of Handke's mother. Handke has written this novel in the memory of his mother soon after her death in order to get relaxation from the horror and sorrow of his mother's death.

These studies have explored the poor conditions of Austrian women and the life, sufferings, struggles and history of Austrian women in the novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. My research also focuses on the representation of mother's death in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* but it is different from above studies in a way that it not only represents Handke's mother's suicide and death through the portrayal of an old woman's character but it also aims to explore the other's death in the novel means it explores the life, sufferings, struggles and death of all women of Austria who suffered during the second world war by the traditional norms and customs same like Handke's mother. This study aims to explore the life and death story of women and mothers of Austria and the horror, sorrows and effects of their deaths on their children through the story of Handke's mother and its effects on Handke in his novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*.

### **Research Methodology**

A Research method is a process or technique to implement the plan of investigation in the collection of data to create something new and better understanding of a topic. The research is non-empirical and it follows the method of textual analysis to reach and achieve the goals of the research. Textual analysis is a research method which is used to analyze, interpret and

understand the text and symbols, language and pictures present in the text in order to get information about the topic of the research.

### **Data Analysis**

Peter Handke is an Austrian writer and dramatist who wrote his finest work *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* in 1972 soon after the death of his mother, his focus is not only on the death of his mother but the death by committing suicide and he has also given the reason of her suicide. He has depicted his mother's painful life and her sufferings by traditional society that lead her to commit suicide at the age of 51, she left only horror and sorrow of her death for Handke and in order to get freedom from this horror and sorrow he wrote this novel but he couldn't get as he explains. He has depicted the small village of Austria where women's lives were full of poverty and hopelessness. They were not allowed for more than elementary education, their dreams were broken, they had no opportunities to make their future and career which were only given to men. Their personal feelings, emotions, and individuality were neglected by parents and society, their future and career was a joke for male dominated society, and their lives were limited by the rules of society. This same was the condition of Handke's mother in Austria before leaving her parents' home. In the novel Handke portrays the portrait of his mother's life and death through a woman's character whom he calls "She" throughout the novel but doesn't give her any name.

She was not allowed for secondary and higher education her father allowed her only for elementary education which a daughter deserved in Austria. In order to avoid the traditional norms and customs of society and to make her own career and future she left her parents' home when she was only 15 years old. She started to take cooking classes and entered into a new environment, new world of fashions, friendships and opportunity. During the second world war she met with an older married man and fell in love with him. After his transfer at another place she became pregnant and was forced to marry an alcoholic soldier but she couldn't love him because her only true love was her first love and with an alcoholic husband she was living a lonely life. After the birth of Peter who was considered as an illegitimate child she gave birth to two others and aborted three silently because of her poor conditions and beatings by her husband. After suffering a lot she illegally crossed the borders and returned to her parents' home in Austria, back to same conditions and environment which she once used to avoid by running away. She was trapped again in same boundaries and limited lives in a small village.

Her drunkard husband couldn't give them a better life full of only basic needs their economic conditions were poor, and she was struggling to save her husband's job. These aspects show the unhappiness of Handke's mother's life which was because of her loveless marriage, her broken dreams and her neglected feelings and individuality. Finally in order to make herself free from these sufferings she started to read literature which Handke used to share with her

during his university. According to Handke, she considered every book as written on her own life and she learned and started to talk about herself. The experience of literature became personal to her and it led her into depression because she didn't find hope for her future in it as it only talked about past and told her that she had done late to do something for herself, and Handke reveals that his illegitimate birth was the cause of her sufferings and depressed life. She lost her interest in literature, in life and in self-understanding as her contact with Handke became low after his success as a writer. For some time she involved herself in community gave more care and attention to her family and husband but she found disappointments of home life and felt herself as failed in her struggles. She suffered from a psychological illness and left the community life as well, she started treatment for her mental illness to get rid of this pain and improved from it as well but again she lost her hope in the end and in order to get freedom from all these sufferings and pains she decided to end her life because she found peace and freedom in death only, after dinner she took an overdose of her sleeping pills and committed suicide at the age of 51 in the same home where she was born and left the horror and sorrow of her death for Handke and in order to get relief from this horror and sorrow he wrote this novel but it couldn't give him relief because of his two different feelings on his mother's death like he feels happiness for his mother's liberty and at the same time he feels sorrow and sense of loss of his mother.

*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is a life story a biography of his mother that is told with honesty and simplicity and it presents his mother's life story with full clarity. It is a memoir and memory that represents the life, sufferings, struggles, suicide and death of his mother caused by the traditional norms and customs of society as well as by the effects of Second World War.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the representation of mother's death in Peter Handke's novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. The novel portrays the life and death story of Handke's mother through the representation of a woman's life and death story, though he didn't give his mother's name to the woman's character and depicted her by using she but her story is completely similar to the life, sufferings and death of his own mother which shows that he has explored his own mother's story in the novel, another evidence is that he wrote this novel soon after the death of his mother and at her funeral he realized the need of writing about his mother in order to get rid of the horror and sorrow of her death so he wrote this novel which clearly represents his mother's death but its focus is mainly on death by suicide rather than only death. He has depicted the poor conditions of his mother in her parents' home in Austria as well as the conditions of all Austrian women who were living a life of poverty and hopelessness in Austria. In their society women's career and future was a joke they were not allowed to pursue their secondary and higher education and to make their own career and future independently these norms of society led some women like Handke's mother to escape from these boundaries in order to make their career



by leaving their home. After leaving her home and struggling a lot in her life his mother found her struggles failed as she married to an alcoholic soldier and her marriage was without love and full of joyless duty and beatings by her drunkard husband these sufferings led her to return to her parents' home in Austria where she found herself again trapped in same conditions and traditional norms from which she used to run away. After suffering and struggling throughout her life she realized that she can find peace and freedom only in death so she ended her life by committing suicide at the age of 51 in the same home where she was born and left the horror and sorrow behind for Handke that forced him to write something in her memory on her life and death.

---

---

### References

- Handke, P. (1972). *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. Pushkin press.
- Atay, H.D. (2019). The Punctum in History: Representing the M(other)'s Death in Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. Vol(21). *CLCweb: Comparative Literature and Culture*.
- Walsh, M. (2013). A Mother's Story, for Brief Moments, in *Dreams: The Problems of Language*. Retrieved from <https://www.bordercrossingmag.com>.
- Booth, J. (2015). Peter Handke: the truth about sorrow. Retrieved from <https://www.scholarsandrogues.com>.
- The art of distilling a life lived: *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* by Peter Handke. (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.roughghosts.com>.
- Rashid, T. (2019). *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* by Peter Handke- memoir, sufferings and politics. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com>.