



Holocaust Trauma and its Aftermath in Literature

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ABSTRACT: Holocaust comes from the Greek word holokauston meaning “completely burnt offering to God”, implying that Jews and other “undesirables” murdered during World War II were a sacrifice to God. The phenomenon of Holocaust has become the object of many scientific studies and works of art as well. The events of Holocaust have provoked a renewed interest in the concept of trauma. Approaching the horror of the Holocaust through the art can help people understand the events better and cope with them. This Paper deals with events of Holocaust and works of art created in various languages. The events of Holocaust had called attention to trauma in its original field of study, psychology. The history and developments of trauma within psychology and various psychological approaches towards trauma will be discussed. The different types of atrocities and its after effects on victims will be discussed in this paper.

KEYWORDS: Holocaust, Trauma, Nazi Germany, Jews, Literature.

“Holocaust refers to Nazi Germany’s attempt to eradicate the Jews of Europe” (Smith 1). ‘Holocaust’ is a word of Greek origin meaning “sacrifice by fire”. In January 1933, the Nazi’s came to power in Germany who believed that the Germans were racially superior and regarded Jews, as an alien threat to the so-called German racial community. During the epoch of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived racial inferiority: Roma (Gypsies), the disabled and some of the Slavic peoples. Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Homosexuals.

During the era of Holocaust, children were predominantly vulnerable. About 1.5 million children were killed by Germans and their confederates. They killed over a million Jewish children and tens of thousands of Roman (Gypsies), German children with physical and mental

disabilities living in institutions, Polish children and children residing in the occupied Soviet Union. In ghettos, they lacked adequate clothing and shelter and many died from starvation and exposure.

Der stumer, the weekly Nazi newspaper was a major tool of the Nazi’s propaganda assault. At the bottom of the front page of each issue, the paper proclaimed in bold letters “The Jews are our misfortune!”. Jews were caricatured as hooked nose and apelike in cartoon of Der stumer. Nazis justified their treatment of Jews through combining their racial theories with Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories. Germans were regarded as the strongest and fittest who were destined to rule while the weak and adulterated Jews were doomed to extinction. Adolf Hitler restricted the Jews with legislation and terror which entailed burning books written by Jews, removing Jews from their professions and public schools confiscating their businesses and property and excluding them from public events.

During the early years of Nazi regime concentration camps were established by the National Socialist government to detain real and imagined opponents. Before the outbreak of war Schutzstaffel and police officials incarcerated Jews, Roma and other victims of ethnic and racial hatred in these camps. To monitor the Jewish population, the German created ghettos, transit camps and forced labor camps for Jews. This concentration of their Jewish population later aided the Nazi’s in their deportation of the Jews to the death camps. The ghettos lacked the necessary food, water, space and sanitary facilities required by so many people living within their constricted boundaries. Many died of deprivation and starvation.

The Nazis spared Jews for systematic and total annihilation while they murdered other national and ethnic groups, such as a number of Soviet prisoners of war, Polish intellectuals and Gypsies. Jewish men, women and children were marked out for ‘special treatment’ where they were killed with poisonous gases. The reason behind the death of Jews who had been gassed was indicated by ‘SB’,



the first letters of the two words for the German term for 'Special Treatment' was recorded in Auschwitz death camp records.

The Nazis established six killing centers in Poland which were near railway lines for the ease of transporting Jews daily. The death camps were supported with a vast system of camps. These camps were established for varying purposes, some were slave labor camps, some transit camps, other concentration camps and their sub camps, and still other the notorious death camps. Nazis forced Jews to wear badges marking them as Jews in every country overrun by them. They were rounded up into ghettos or concentration camps and then gradually transported to the killing centers. The Germans shipped thousands of Jews to them each day. Within a few hours of their arrival, the Jews had been stripped of their possessions and valuables, gassed to death and their bodies burned in specially designed crematoriums. Approximately, 3.5 million Jews were murdered in these camps.

By the spring of 1945, discrepancy aroused within German leadership with Hermann Goering and Heinrich Himmler seeking to distance themselves from Hitler and take power. Hitler blamed the war on International Jewry and its helper in his last will and political testament dictated in a German bunker. He urged the German leaders and people to follow the strict observance of the racial laws and with merciless resistance against the universal prisoners of all people-The Jews. The following day Hitler committed suicide.

In the fall of 1944, German forces evacuated many death camps and inmates were sent under guard to march further from advancing enemy's front line. These death marches resulted in the death of some 2,50,000 to 3,75,000 people. Between 1948 and 1951, almost 7,00,000 Jews moved to Israel, including 1,36,000 Jewish displaced persons from Europe. Other Jews moved to the United States and other nations. The crimes committed during the Holocaust devastated most European Jewish communities and eliminated hundreds of Jewish communities in occupied Eastern Europe entirely.

In his classic book "*Survival in Auschwitz*", the Italian Jewish author Primo Levi described his own state of mind as well as that of his fellow inmates in Auschwitz on the day before Soviet troops arrived at the camps in January 1945:

"We lay in a world of death and phantoms. The last trace of civilizations had vanished around and inside us. The work of bestial degradation, begun by the victorious Germans, had

been carried to conclusion by the Germans in defeat" (171).

The wounds of the Holocaust were slow to heal. Survivors of the camps found it nearly impossible to return home, as in many cases they had lost their families and been denounced by their non-Jewish neighbors. As a result, the late 1940s, saw an unprecedented number of refugees and other displaced population moving across the Europe. In an effort to punish the villains of the Holocaust, the Allies held the Nuremberg Trials of 1945-46, which brought Nazi atrocities to horrifying light. Allied powers were pressurized to create a homeland for Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, which led to an ordinance for the creation of Israel. As a part of acquiescence, the German government made payments to the Jewish people for the crimes committed in the name of German people.

The events of the Holocaust were depicted through fiction, drama and poetry. Germans wrote vaguely about the Holocaust during the 1940s and 1950s. It was interpreted that German authors were writing around the Holocaust. The Holocaust was mythologized using universalizing techniques, blurring the boundaries between perpetrators and victims, denying crimes and drawing attention to side effects of the Holocaust. Many of the authors in their text described about how the Holocaust came, they seldom gave attention to the Holocaust itself. The most important views about the Holocaust were written by non-Germans. The people who experienced the Holocaust were traumatized and found it difficult to write about them. Other important French Jewish writers who began publishing about the Holocaust in the first three decades after the war include Romain Gary, Jean-Francois Steiner, and Henri Raczymov. Jean Malaquais, Fanny Levy and Yael Hassan were authors who published fiction about Holocaust in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Through the end of 1980s, most German fiction writers chose to avoid Holocaust themes. The best-known author to have dealt with the Nazi regime was probably Gunther Grass. Jacob Lind dealt directly with Jewish themes in his writings. Until 1970s those Germans who wrote about the Nazi period generally portrayed both perpetrators and victims in a two-dimensional fashion. This black and white presentation of events is evident in Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. In the 1990s many literary works were published in German about the Holocaust, both original works in German and translations in German. Holocaust was also used as a theme in German Poetry. One of the most



powerful poems ever written about the murder of the Jews is Paul Celan's *Todesfuge* or *Death Fugue*.

Holocaust has also made its imprint on Hebrew literature. Some of Israel's most highly regarded and bestselling authors have written about the Holocaust, including Dan Ben Amotz, David Grossman, Haim Guri, Savyon Liebrecht, Aharon Megeed, Uri Orlev, Amos Oz and Dan Pagis. In Poland there was a wave of writing about the Holocaust immediately after the war. After a wave of Polish Antisemitism in the late 1960s, Polish literature devoted greater attention to the subject of Jewish-Polish relations during the Holocaust. The major preoccupied Polish Holocaust literature is that of Janusz Korczak. The Polish writings of Tadeus Borowski such as *This Way to the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen* are noteworthy.

The flourishing of modern Yiddish literature was halted by the Holocaust. Little is known about the Yiddish literature created in the extermination camps, as it was hard to find a hiding place for literary works in the camps. Still a few works created in the camps were saved, such as Zalman Gradowski's *sin Harts fun Gehehem*. The texts of songs sung in Chelmno, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and other extermination camps were published by Nahum Blumenthal.

The aspects of Holocaust have been written by both the Jews and non-Jews in the French language. The best-known non-Jews who wrote in this vein are Charlotte Delbo and Jorge Semprum. Elie Wiesel is the best-known Jewish writer who wrote about the Holocaust in French. His works are best known for depicting the real-life Holocaust experience and a poetic universe rooted in Jewish tradition. *The Last of Just* is one of the most significant allegorical works about Holocaust written by Andre Schwartz-Bart, which explores the significance of the sanctification of God's name.

The amount of literature on the Holocaust that has appeared in English is immense. It reflects the tremendous surge of interest that began in the United States in the last three decades of the twentieth century. As a group of Americans have confronted the Holocaust through the eyes of others, with only immigrant survivors and some soldiers having direct contact with its horror. The first American encounter can be found in the writings of returning American soldiers. The horror of their encounter so exceeded the grasp of the imagination that language tried to contain it was often stretched to its limits. This can be seen in the works of John Hersey, Bernard Malamud and Lewis Wallant. In the two decades following the Eichmann Trial, a kind of fascination with the Nazism led to the

flourishing of an American Literature in the Holocaust. From the mid-1970s onward, the voices of the survivors began to be heard. In addition, best-selling writers, Jews and non-Jews have used the Holocaust or the Nazi camps as themes in their works. Among them are Saul Bellow (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*), William Styron (*Sophie's Choice*), Cynthia Ozick (*The Shawl*) and Belva Plain (*Legacy of Silence*). In the last decade of the twentieth century the impact of the Holocaust has been so great that its study has become a staple course at many universities and colleges in the United States.

Literature and poetry on the Holocaust have appeared in many other languages, as well, both as original creations and in translations. There is a significant body of books in Czech, Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian. Books have also appeared in most of the other European languages, including Finnish, Ladino and Greek.

The problem of trauma brought up an interest in the fields of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and sociology. The Post Traumatic Disorder was conceded as an infirmity of memory officially in 1980 by The American Psychiatric Association. The concept is that owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events the mind is split or dissociated. Traumatic or stressful events may include being a witness to or being involved in a violent accident or crime, military combat or assault, being kidnapped, being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or experience with fear and helplessness, persistently relives the events and tries to avoid being reminded of it. The event may be relived in dream and waking thoughts.

When considering trauma as a psychoanalytical problem, it is extant as a pathological problem in relation with distortions caused by dreams, wishes and repressions. As a result, psychological trauma has its central focus on the struggle between the denial and the proclamation about the horrible events among the people. The survivor of Holocaust or atrocities often narrate their miseries in a highly emotional, contradictory and fragmented manner and as a result undermines the credibility and serves double objective of truth telling and secrecy. But often the secrecy prevails and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom.

The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people are that they simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most ostensible in the way traumatized people alternate between



feeling numb and reliving the events. The mental health professional George Orwell, one of the prominent critics called the enigmatic alteration of consciousness because of the trauma as 'double think' and in the simpler term the mental health professionals called it 'dissociation'.

Witnesses as well as victims are subjected to the dialectic of trauma. They see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time and it is difficult for them to retain all the pieces and to fit them together. They find it more difficult to find a language that conveys completely and persuasively what one has seen. Those who describe the atrocities risk their credibility. Enunciating publicly about the atrocities is like inviting stigma.

"A child survivor of the Holocaust who had been at Theresienstadt continually had flashbacks of trains, and didn't know where they came from; she thought she was going crazy. Until, one day, in a group survivor meeting, a man says, "Yes, at Theresienstadt you could see the trains through the bars of the children's barracks". She was relieved to discover she was not mad" (Kinsler 176).

Even though the information about the horrible events dope into public awareness from time to time, it seldom remains for long. Denial, repression and dissociation run on a social as well as an individual level. There is a covert history about psychological trauma, such as traumatized people we have been ceased from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reacquire the present and the future. There upon an understanding of psychological trauma which commence with redescriving history.

Both the human vulnerability in the natural world and the capacity for evil in the human nature are to be considered while studying Psychological trauma. People recall the traumatic events in their dreams and they determine to avoid anything that reminds them of such atrocities. They experience a numbing responsiveness with a state of hyper arousal. Other symptoms observed in traumatized people are depression, anxiety and cognitive difficulties such as poor concentration. Severity is the most important risk factor for this disorder.

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and Kali Tal's *World of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* published in 1996 gained significant attention to the field of trauma studies in literary criticism. In literary criticism the progression of Trauma theory could be deduced in terms of changing definitions of trauma as well as the semiotic, rhetoric and social

concerns that are part of the study of trauma in literature and society.

In literary criticism Trauma maintains a topological hegemony owing to the theoretically appealing quality to raise larger questions on the relationship between victim, perpetrator and witness. Trauma being understood as the return of repressed and a sense of absence in Freud and Lacan's terms, Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* writes:

"trauma is not locatable in the simple, violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature- the way it is precisely not known the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4).

The surplus characteristic yields not only disorientation but also fascination. Trauma evokes a "radical intensity" that Michael S Roth relates to dystopia and Lacapra to the sublime:

"The concept of trauma has come to perform some of the same functions that negative utopia or dystopia once did. Trauma, like utopia, designates phenomena that cannot be properly represented, but one characterized by radical intensity. A wide spread longing for intensity has come to magnetize the concept of trauma, giving it a cultural currency far beyond the borders of psychology and psychoanalysis. Trauma has become the dystopia of the spirit, showing us much about our own preoccupations with catastrophe, memory, and gave difficulties we seem to have in negotiating between the internal and extended world" (Roth 90-91).

Caruth described trauma as a wound inflicted not upon the body but on the mind that could not be available to consciousness as it happened unexpectedly. The trauma truly process only when the experiences assess' itself again. A traumatic experience should be understood in terms of what is known, but also on what is known in its first instance and what remains unknown in the following instances. Caruth contend that the repression of a traumatic event is inherent in this event itself.

It is not possible to experience the traumatic event when it occurs as one cannot register it. The traumatic events keeps retorting to the victim which gives him/her a second chance to feel the feelings s/he should have felt at the moment of impact. Paradoxically enough, the event is preserved in its literality, even though it could not be fully perceived. It is as if the victim did not experience, but witness the event which can only be known through its very inaccessibility. We can only find this tension of what is known and what is not



known in literature. Caruth argues that “literature like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (Caruth 3). Caruth in *Explorations in Memory* argues that literature help us to infer traumatic experience as it teaches readers to listen to what can be told only indirect and surprising ways. Traumatic experiences can be known only through what it is not. The individual has an image, sensation, or isolated thought but does not know what it is connected with or what it means.

The evolution of trauma theory in literary criticism might be best understood in terms of changing psychological definitions of trauma as well as the semiotic, rhetorical and social concerns that are part of the study of trauma in literature and society. The history of the concept of trauma is filled with contradictory theories and contentious debates, leaving both psychologists and literary scholars the ability to work with varying definitions of trauma and its effects. However, the literature on trauma also reached far beyond the boundaries of analyzing the psychological damage experienced by survivors of Holocaust, and instead also shaped questions in relation to the narrative construction of the historiography of the Holocaust, approaches to the chronological structure of collective memory studies as well as the representational form embraced by memorials to the Holocaust, Nazi era crimes and human right abuses more broadly.

The newest criticism restructured the way we understand trauma’s function in literature by employing psychoanalytical and semiotic theories. The contemporary critics focused on the rhetorical, semiotic and social implications of trauma. They have developed neo Lacanian, neo Freudian and new semiotic approaches. This shift in literary trauma theory produced a set of cultural practices that focused more on the particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experiences.

The trope of the unspeakable has procured prominence within trauma studies in our own modern/postmodern epoch. The influential proclamation of Adorno that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz has exerted a pervasive influence in the new literary trauma studies descending from Shoshanna Felman, Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, Marianne Hirsh and Geoffrey Hartman. The contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma induce a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. However, a discursive dependence

upon a single psychological theory of trauma creates a homogeneous interpretation of the diverse representation in the trauma novel and interplay that occurs between language, memory and place.

The trauma novel demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments. The physical environment provides the opportunity to scrutinize both the personal and cultural histories entrenched in landscapes which defines the character’s identity and meaning of a traumatic experience. Hence the novel represents this disruption between self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma.

A diversity of extreme emotional states are conveyed through a trauma novel with an assortment of narrative innovation such as landscape imagery, temporal fissures, silence or narrative omissions withholding of graphic, visceral traumatic details. A non linear plot or disruptive temporal techniques are often employed by the author to emphasize mental confusion, chaos or contemplation as a response to the experience.

A broadened approach to the analysis of trauma that moves beyond a singular psychological model offers greater understanding of the multiple meanings of traumatic experience for the individuals and society.

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