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## The trauma of holocaust in Elie Wiesel's 'Night'

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### Abstract

This paper aims to look at the trauma inflicted by Holocaust in the work of Elie Wiesel. Wars have always been a part of human existence since time immemorial. Beginning from the Trojan War in 12th century BC to World War 1 in 20th century this world has seen all but World War 2 sticks out because of the sheer scale of death and destructions. Jewish Holocaust was one such atrocious chapter in the history of human existence. It resulted in the detainment of thousands of men, women and children. This trauma of Holocaust is undoubtedly transmitted from the survivors to succeeding generations, yet the transmitted psychological effects are the most potent as they impact multiple realms of successors' lives. This paper aims to study the trauma in the memoir written by a Holocaust survivor who witnessed war in his childhood and remain affected by its repercussions all throughout his life. The paper also highlights the repercussions like depression, memory loss and loss of identity associated with Holocaust.

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### Introduction

#### Understanding the History of Holocaust

Holocaust one of the most atrocious chapters in the history of human existence was a systematic persecution and murder of six million jews by the Nazi regime. The holocaust began with the rise in power of Adolf Hitler in January 1933 and ended in 1945 when allied powers defeated the Nazi regime. The holocaust resulted in the wiping out of two third of European Jews and one third of all the Jews in the world. The Germans believed that they were 'racially superior' and considered the 'Jews' to be inferior and therefore they devised a 'Final Solution' to erase the race of the Jews from the face of the earth.

After Germany's defeat in the World War 1, it had to face severe repercussions. Germany was forced to pay indemnity and was asked to accept its guilt for the war. This resulted in the destruction of German empire and emergence of National Socialist German Worker Party (Nazi). In 1933, Adolf Hitler was elected as the commander of the Nazi party and from the very beginning he blamed the Jews for Germany's fall. The Nazi party published a weekly newspaper named 'Der Sturmer' (The Attacker) and used it to widespread their propoganda that 'The Jews are Misfortune'. Later Hitler became the chancellor of the Nazi party and called for new election to garner full authority over German Parliament. The Nazi used government apparatus and machinery to petrify their opponents and even arrested many opponent leaders. In 1927, German Parliament was burnt and this prophesied the burning of German democracy. On march5, 1927, when the lections took place, Nazi won forty four percent of the total vote and came to the power. But soon enough Nazi party transitioned from being an elected party to dictatorship.

The Nazi passed an 'Enabling bill' in march which allowed Hitler to move further with his propogandas. The Nazi power used a well-established system to silence their critics. Any kind of opposition was beaten up and sent to concentration camps. 'Dachau' was the first concentration camp right outside Munich and later it became a camp dedicated to the Jews and brutality against them.

Now Hitler had absolute power and his anti-Jew campaign was in full swing. Hitler considered Jews to be 'foreign' and a 'corrupting influence' on the German culture. They blamed Jews for corroding German culture and Germany's economy. Jews were ripped off of their titles and their jobs. Their offices were shut down, they were banned from any public events, their properties were confiscated and any books written by a Jewish writer was burnt. On September 15, 1935, Nuremberg laws were passed which intensified the oppression of the Jews and many of them tried to flee the country. By 1941, countries in Europe were shut down to legal immigration and Jews got trapped.

In June 1941, Germany began its 'Final solution'. Jews were forced to wear a badge distinguishing them from the Germans. Hitler declared, "Be merciless! Be brutal. This war is to be a war of annihilation". This result in the detainment of thousands of women, children and men who were forced to live in such horrible condition that many drowned in lavatories. They were huddled in the ghettos, then taken to the concentration camps and finally to the killing centres. In process of massacre, they were stripped off their clothes, lined up and shot using automatic weapons, for example in the Babi Yar massacre, more than 35,000 Jews were killed in less than two days. Other form of obliteration by Nazis was Gas chambers. Jews from all over the country were brought to the killing centres and were huddled in the chambers with poisonous gas which resulted in their ultimate killing.

"All wars whether just or unjust are waged against children" (Ejlantyne Jebb). Although ramification of war can't be measured as more or less on the basis of age but children remain the most affected section of the population of all the wars. At the start of World War 2, there were 1.7 million Jews under the age of 16 years and only 10% of them managed to survive the atrocities of Nazi regime. Although all the prisoners of concentration camps were subjected to physical, emotional and mental torture but children, because they were deemed, "not useful" as they couldn't work or obey orders were treated more harshly. Richard C. Lukas in his book '*Did the children cry?*' wrote, "Coughing and the heart-rending sobs of dying children were the usual music of concentration camps. How many child victims these camps accounted for, it is impossible to say and we shall never learn the whole truth".

Other than the violence, adult Holocaust victims were witnessing war against the backdrop of what they had experienced as normal life. Children on the other hand had nothing to compare it to. Many of them were born in camps and this was their reality. Their initial memories were of death, terror, violence and cruelty. Many of them have no memory to begin with because they were too young to contemplate and too preoccupied with survival amidst war. Most of them had no parents, either they were killed in front of them or were sent to different concentration camps. They never got to understand the concept of family and as Moskovitz, a Holocaust survivor said, "Loss of parents in early life is like the loss of very nucleus of one's identity". It leaves one yearning for a link to himself. These children of Holocaust didn't just suffer from trauma but loss of identity, memory lapses, anxiety, depression and disintegration of relationships. Gideon Hausne, an attorney general was the chief prosecutor of one of the post war trials. After examining all the atrocities against Jewish children, he summarized, "No part of all the bloody work is so shocking and terrible as that of millions of Jewish children whose blood was split like

water throughout Europe; how they were separated from their mothers, murdered and thrown out of truck, torn to pieces and their little head smashed to the ground" (Child Survivors of Holocaust, Robert Krell).

Holocaust Literature has a wide variety of literary form and has multiple dimensions and styles associated with it. A considerable contribution is made in this field by the survivors or victims of Holocaust like Elie Wiesel, Israel Meir Lau, Michael Bornstein, and Felix Weinberg etc. by writing Memoirs. Holocaust was a painful memory for the victims and writing about it is like diving into cold, dangerous water (Abercrombie). But even after witnessing the barbaric Nazi regime, survivors like Elie Wiesel decided to testify before the humanity to what he has seen so that such genocide can be prevented from happening in future. He said, "I believed that having survived my chance, I was duty bound to give meaning to my survival. I knew the story had to be told" (Confronting the Holocaust, 1978). This paper will try to study the trauma as conferred by the memoirs of the survivors. Texts like *Night* by Elie Wiesel will be analyzed.

### Trauma: An Archetype emotion of Holocaust

The word 'trauma' originates from the Latin word 'trauma' which finds its root in the Greek word 'Traumatikos'. The word 'Traumatikos' originally meant 'a serious wound to the body'. With the passage of time and research the word 'trauma' is referred to the psychological wounds and mental distress. The American Psychological Association define trauma as a response to some horrific incident. Trauma is said to be the emotional response of a person towards something very disruptive which injures one's sense to identity and their outlook towards life. Trauma is considered to have more psychological impact rather than physical and can prove to be life threatening as well. Although trauma is something which happen because of some outside activity but depending on the gravity of the situation, it soon acquires an engrained space in the mind of the effected. Sandra L. Bloom, a psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of psychological trauma, quoted Lenore Terr, a child psychiatrist in her work *Trauma Theory Abbreviated*, "Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden unexpected overwhelming intense emotional blow or series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind" (Bloom 2).

Trauma studies primarily deals with the understanding and interpretation of traumatic experiences in the life of a person. In literature trauma studies gain popularity around 1990s. Prior to this new model, the knowledge of trauma was based on the Freudian model which meant an extreme experience that can not be expressed using language. In Freud's model, trauma originates from a suppressed, unexpressed sexual assault. Freud and Breuer emphasize in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) that the original event was not traumatic in itself but only in its remembrance. Freud's study of trauma in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* based on the symptoms of World War 1 veterans could be considered as the outset in the field of Trauma studies. This was followed by the discourse that emerged in the light of several other significant events of the past decades that accelerated the literary evaluation of this field. Later Cathy Caruth in the introduction of her seminal work *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, points out that the term trauma gain prominence after the catastrophic event of Vietnam War. Multiple dramatic films were released describing the traumatic impact

of war on the soldiers and how it affected them in their post war life as well. It was the same time when American Psychiatric Association came up with the term 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' in 1980s.

### Understanding trauma in Cathy Caruth's writings

In 1990s, scholars like Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman, Geoffery Hartman came up with their own definition of trauma. This was called as the first wave of criticism in the field of trauma studies and popularised the definition of trauma as an event that fragments the consciousness and intercept its expression in language. The basic framework of the dominant literary trauma theory was best articulated by Cathy Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience* when she says that "trauma is not locatable in the simple lent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it's very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - return haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). Caruth believed that trauma is something outside normal memory and is capable of destroying personal identity. She infers that the experience of trauma might no ever be narrated in its utmost clarity but they act like a tumour and wound the consciousness. Trauma's strange absence yet ghostlike presence in consciousness, its lack of homogenizing into memory and stories, emits a constant shadow that indirectly points toward trauma's meaning and the truth of the past. The publication of books like Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Soshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing* (1991), Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experiences* (1996) solidified the emergence of Trauma as an important literary concern for the scholars to research on. Other Key factors that propelled the popularity of trauma studies was well received documentary Shoah, released in 1985 by Claude Lanzmann based on the Holocaust, opening of State Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC in 1993 and the well acclaimed success of Stephan Spielberg's Schindler's List in the same year.

Trauma is the central notion in the study of Holocaust. In both the Historical as well as psychological analysis of the Holocaust, it is found that the trauma is not limited to an event that happened in the past but is a continuous entity which keeps on reoccurring and impacting the lives of survivors. Thomas Trezise points out, the Holocaust was for a long time perceived as "unspeakable." Holocaust was a painful memory for the victims and writing about it is like diving into cold, dangerous water (Abercrombie). But even after witnessing the barbaric Nazi regime, survivors like Elie Wiesel decided to testify before the humanity to what he has seen so that such genocide can be prevented from happening in future. He said, "I believed that having survived my chance, I was duty bound to give meaning to my survival. I knew the story had to be told" (Confronting the Holocaust, 1978).

A wide range of literature is available on Holocaust and a lot of research has been done on it. But most of these works have adults in the centre. Children, as they have no memory or fragmented idea of war were considered unfit for any compensation and were not even considered as damaged. Although with the passage of time researchers like came forward with the idea of a separate group of child survivors and the belief that younger the child at the time of persecution, the more serious is his damage. Today, most of the Holocaust survivors are either dead or are on the verge of

dying. Memoirs are their only remaining part of war and as Elie Wiesel said "to forget them is to kill them twice".

### Tracing the trauma in the memoir *Night*

Holocaust Literature has a wide variety of literary form and has multiple dimensions and styles associated with it. A considerable contribution is made in this field by the survivors or victims of Holocaust like Elie Wiesel, Israel Meir Lau, Michael Bornstein, and Felix Weinberg etc. by writing Memoirs. The word memoir, taken from a French word 'memoria' meaning reminiscence emerged as a prominent literary form after Jean Jacques Rousseau's 'Confession'. Memoirs are considered as the primitive form of autobiographical writings. In her book 'Trauma: Exploration in memory' (1995), Cathy Caruth says that literature has the power to reveal the hidden and the unspeakable. Memoirs a reminiscence of barbaric past of the Holocaust survivors exactly proves Cathy's words. 'N.Scott Momoday' in his essay 'Man made of words' (1997) mentioned that, anything is worth suffering if you can make an art out of it. Holocaust was a painful memory for the victims and writing about it is like diving into cold, dangerous water (Abercrombie). But even after witnessing the barbaric Nazi regime, survivors like Elie Wiesel decided to testify before the humanity to what he has seen so that such genocide can be prevented from happening in future. He said, "I believed that having survived my chance, I was duty bound to give meaning to my survival. I knew the story had to be told" (Confronting the Holocaust, 1978). The juxtaposition of innocence of child with the atrocities to Nazi regime serves to emphasize the horror of Holocaust even more clearly. These child victims were a part of something which ruined their ideas of humanity and one out of three of them suffered from PTSD.

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz has written one such memoir named 'Night'. Elie Wiesel was awarded with the Noble Prize in 1986 and has been called 'the messenger of mankind' by the Noble committee. Wiesel was born in Sighet, a town in Romania which was later annexed by Nazis. He was a Jew and was encouraged to learn Hebrew. His father was a small business man and owned a shop in the town. His family was a well-respected family and lead a comfortable life. But, World War two changed the course of their lives. Both his parents died a painful death in the concentration camps. His two younger sisters were also murdered by the Nazis in this genocide. Somehow Wiesel survived and was sent to an orphanage in France. Later on, he became a journalist. Wiesel vowed to never speak of the atrocities that he witnessed in the camps after his release from the camp but he broke this promise and started writing. His seminal work was 'And the World Remained Silent' which he wrote in Yiddish language. Later on, this work was edited and further published as 'Night', 'Dawn' and 'Day'

In the memoir 'Night' Wiesel highlighted the intensity of atrocities against the jews, the horrors of being pushed out of their homes, to leave everything that people collected over time and pack their lives in one bag, to be separated from their mothers and elders, to wait in the scorching heat for their turns and finally to be sent to one of the concentration camps. A single order of a uniformed officer, "Men to the left! Women to the right" (Night 47), separated them forever from his family and never saw his mother and sister after that day. In the beginning of the memoir, Eliezer is a 12 years old boy who is very religious and intelligent. He lives comfortably

with his family and his father own a small shop. He also has a friend named Moché the Beadle, who is an immigrant. With the invasion of war, it was immigrants who were attacked at first. Moche and his family were sent away by the police but he came back to tell the horrific story of the train being stopped and people being slaughtered by the Nazis. Although people didn't believe him and considered him to be gone mad. Jews didn't believe that Hitler intended to exterminate them. But soon, the time came, Hungary was annexed and all the Jews were sent to the ghettos. They were sealed in the cattle cars and were treated like animals. The prisoners were tattooed and were reduced to mere numbers. They were scrapped of any of their religious symbols, their hair was shaved and their beards were cut off. They were reduced to sub-humans and were made to work like beasts. The number of Jews was drastically decreasing because of exhaustion, starvation, torture, and inhumane conditions. They were made to move from one camp to another in freezing cold weather and were fed black coffee and a watery soup. If a Jew was not able to keep up with the pace, they were executed. Nazi Officers also ran along with them, "their fingers on the triggers" and if one of them stopped, "they did not deprive themselves of the pleasure" (Night 103) of shooting them at that very moment.

The biggest harm caused by Nazis was the loss of dignities in the prisoners. The Jews were reduced to numbers and anything which could have made them hold on to their self-respect was taken away. When Eliezer's father asked about the restroom in one of the concentration camp, Wiesel writes, "Kappo slapped my father with such force that he fell down and then crawled back on all fours" (39). The situation was extremely grim and the sense of family and identity were at risk. He presented the barbarity in the camp with thorough specifics. A merchant's son had been "forced to place, his own father's body into the furnace" (53). As pointed by Caruth, trauma is recurring and therefore, the memories of those horrible sights, effected even in the afterlife of the children who survived the Holocaust. Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence* described the aftermath of these conditions on child survivors who were "flooded with anxiety dreams" (201). Wiesel depicts his struggle with God, evil and Human nature all throughout the memoir. He is constantly struggling to support his father in the camps. He gives his share of food and ration to his father, he teaches him how to march properly, but it is not enough. After a certain point of time, he feels that his father is a liability and is angry at his father. When the officers are beating his father, he says, "I had watched it all happening without moving. I kept silent. In fact, I thought of stealing away in order not to suffer the blows" (54). Elie struggle to support his father in the camps and the trauma of the Holocaust has de-humanized their relationship so much so that when Elie was searching for his lost father, he thinks to himself, "If only I didn't find him! If only I were relieved of this responsibility, I could use all my strength for my survival" (106). The atrocities have made them feel that in the presence of extreme danger on has to adapt new maxims of life and personal survival should be the prime motive. Although in a civilized society, parent-child relationship is a sacred one but, in the camps, one has to look after themselves first. Eliezer's father soon died and he was not even allowed to mourn or cry his father's death. Although soon after, American tanks arrive and they were liberated. Once free, Wiesel had a vision, a vision that he could never forget and it was of dead corpses. He writes, "I had not seen

myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes has never left me "(115).

### Conclusion

Although it is true Night is a reaction of Wiesel to the past but it is equally true that it is also a reaction to his own internal traumas and conflicts. Through this novel Wiesel highlighted the continuing trauma that the survivors had to go through all throughout their lives. In the light of Trauma theory, this continuing reoccurrence is explained as the repercussion of a survivor's inability to understand what exactly has happened to them. It is understood as the aftermath of shock which they have gone through in the concentration camps. This trauma is not limited to the first-generation survivor but also extends to the coming generations as well. Night is a prototype of what living in the inhumane conditions and seeing your family members die can do to a person. Wiesel also shows that there is no end to this suffering and even after one is saved, the memories of the ghettos and the smell of burning flesh of children keeps one awake throughout their lives. Many of the survivors like Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo suffered from countless ailments like dementia and amnesia. In this novel Weisel depicted his struggle with life, goodness, evil and God. He described what 'rise of animalistic human uprising' looks like and how doomed the weak are in its terror. Wiesel used the concept of memory to show how not just the victims of Holocaust but the entire Jewish community in totality is scarred by the wounds of Nazi genocide. The historical facts provided by Wiesel in this memoir give new insight to the Holocaust and forces us to take responsibility of the wrong done by the people in power. Although writing about such an atrocious act might not be a pleasant task but these survivors presented the account of the brutality of the Nazis so that readers keep it in their memory and prevent anything of this sort from happening in the future. As Hary James Cargas observes in his book *Responses to Elie Wiesel* (1978) that "memory transforms the dead, the absent, and makes them present. By "restoring life" to the dead, suffering and oblivion is in a limited sense, transcended." (Cargas 119).

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