

Paronia, Deflation of Self and Decadence of Faith: The Traumatic Experiences of Elie Wiesel in *Night*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose this research paper is to bring educational awareness to students of history and education. The Holocaust was a great political event like the Nuclear Holocaust; Hitler ventured to decimate all the Jews from Europe and he created concentration camps and gas chambers. Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Charlotte Delbo throw a flood of light on the brutal atrocities of the Nazis. Elie Wiesel got Nobel Prize for literature because of his realistic depiction of the atrocities of the Nazis perpetrated on Jews. Elie Wiesel's novels, lectures and interviews describe his perception about the life before and after Auschwitz. Wiesel was also the

victim of the atrocities of German Gestapo. He was sent to Auschwitz where he experienced the atrocities of the Jews. He recalls the painful and harrowing episodes of Auschwitz. Elie Wiesel articulates his traumatic experiences of the death camps recollecting the harrowing episodes of Auschwitz. He felt alienated and suffered from the psychological ailments such as schizophrenia and paranoia before and after Auschwitz. It seems to Wiesel that there will be no end to the Holocaust sufferings and agony. Its memory always haunted him as he lost faith in God. In this paper the loss of self of Wiesel is examined and explored.

KEY WORDS: TRAUMATIC, HOLOCAUST, COMMUNITY, BARBARIC, TRILOGY, STRATEGY

Elie Wiesel was conferred the Nobel Prize in 1986 and the Noble Committee hailed him as: the messenger to mankind.” Like Primo Levi, Wiesel is also the survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald; the concentration camps of the Nazis. He is an American professor and an activist who depicted all the stages of his deflation of self during his stay at the death camps. . Kraepelin observes that Paranoia is a disease which consists of an "insidious development of a permanent unshakeable delusional system from inner causes, in which clarity and order of thinking, willing, and action are completely preserved." (Kraepelin) He suffered the deflation of

self because he was always haunted by fear of death. His main mission in Auschwitz was to survive the holocaust trauma and to write about the inhuman cruelties of the Nazis. The prisoners who were sent to the gas chambers also expressed their last wish to document the sufferings. Wiesel wrote *Night* to pay tribute to his fellow Jews who couldn't survive. Wiesel's *Night* is packed with the images of "darkness": "fire"death", "gas", expressing the experiences of nihilism and pessimism. The deflation of his self was a reality as the scenes of horror disoriented his mind. Wiesel emerges as a faithful witness for his "ghosts" transmitting truth to the world. Harry James Cargas published his *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (1976) in which he hailed Wiesel as a modern Job asking the mysterious question: "Why

suffering? For him, God is not dead; but

there are questions He does not answer.”

The Night, Dawn and *The Accident* depict the integrated structural development in the symbolic system. The main protagonist of all these novels is Eliezer whose journey from childhood to adulthood and his struggle with the forces of Nature and God is the main interest of the trilogy. The protagonist of *Night* is Eliezer; he is just 15 years old when he begins his traumatic journey but he grows into an adult when he gets freedom from Auschwitz. Eliezer is the hero of the novel and in fact he is the child of *Night* who described his horrendous journey from the friendly Jewish community to the frightening Auschwitz. Wiesel has depicted the emotional and historical truth about the horrifying events of Auschwitz in the novel. As the novel opens Eliezer is an innocent young boy believer of Jewish

religion but as the plot progresses he becomes a skeptic and starts questioning the presence of God. Eliezer is an innocent child-witness and his voice depicts the impact of violence on the psyche of an individual. His experiences are nightmarish and terrifying as he is transported with his father to an unknown hellish world. He is an unfortunate witness to the slow death of his father and his spiritual death. The traumatic experiences resulted into his deflation of self

Elie Wiesel documented his Holocaust sufferings and agony in the *Night*. Wiesel points out that there is no end to his sufferings as he always feels agony and remains sleepless being haunted by the memories of death and destruction and the horrible scenes of the gas chambers. Many of the survivors such as Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo suffered from amnesia and dementia

because of the haunting memories of Auschwitz. Weisel wrote *Night* (1960) articulating his vision of life, death and faith in God based on his realistic experiences of the concentration camps. Eliezer was transported to Auschwitz with his father. He became adult when he got liberation from Auschwitz. Eliezer describes his horrendous journey from the friendly Jewish community to the frightening Auschwitz. Wiesel has depicted the emotional and historical truth about the horrifying events of Auschwitz in *Night*. As the novel opens Eliezer is an innocent young boy believer of Jewish religion but as the plot progresses he becomes a skeptic and starts questioning the presence of God. Eliezer is an innocent child-witness and his voice depicts the impact of violence on the psyche of an individual. His

experiences are nightmarish and terrifying as he is transported with his father to an unknown hellish world. He is an unfortunate witness to the slow death of his father and his spiritual death.

Wiesel depicts his struggle with evil, God and human nature. Elie Wiesel uses the strings of images and symbols to articulate his confrontation with the forces of evil. He witnessed the collapse of the society; the rule of savage animals and the dissolution of moral values. In his novel *The Fifth Son* (1985) Wiesel discusses that the sufferings of the Holocaust survivors are eternal. In this novel the narrator is the son of a survivor who takes up the theme of the suffering of the next generation and subsequent generation. He says: “children of survivors are almost as traumatized as

the survivors themselves.” (*Night* 192).

The narrator is suffering from the events which he never experienced but the irony is he is stressed. The protagonist is haunted by the question: “Will the impact of the Holocaust be ever nullified?” His touching words are: “I suffer from an Event I have not even experienced.” (*Night* 192) According to his girlfriend Lisa; “he is the most reserved, the most inhibited, the most complex ridden; content to go unnoticed.”(96). Wiesel uses memory to depict the sufferings of the next generation of the survivors. The theme of the novel is that Holocaust will forever impinge on the Jewish consciousness. In *The Holocaust: Definition and Preliminary Discussion* Yad Vashehe observes that the aim of the Nazis was basically not only to kill

but to “dehumanize and exterminate a whole group of people.” Wiesel observes that its memory doesn’t fade; this nightmare goes on disturbing the peace of mind. He opposes oblivion and considers memory as a reflection of faith in God. He feels that it is his ethical responsibility to rely on memory and narrate all that he experienced in Auschwitz.

Do not ever struggle against memory. Even when it is painful; it will help you, it will reward you, it will make you richer. After all, what would culture be without memory? What would love for a friend be without the possibility of remembering it the next day? You cannot live without memory. You cannot

exist without remembering things. (*Night* 140)

Simon. P. Sibelman published his book *Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel* (1995) in which he contended that all the novels of Elie Wiesel depict his metaphysical silence used as a metaphor to explore the relationship between man and God. In the Bible silence symbolizes inner strength; Wiesel has used silence as a literary technique as silence is used as a metaphor for power, freedom and the will to struggle. Wiesel wrote in *The Testament* (1982) thus about silence:

The words you strangle, the words you murder, produce a kind of primary, impenetrable silence. And you will never succeed in killing a silence such as this." (*Night* 15)

Elie Wiesel remained silence for twenty years; he accumulated the power to articulate and wrote about fifty seven books on the traumatic experiences of Auschwitz. Language has no power to capture the truth of the Holocaust. Sibelman argues that like Samuel Beckett Wiesel uses silence to symbolize the loss of hope. In his novels there are breaks, blank spaces, pauses and the use of punctuation as evidence of silence to suggest the unspeakable horrors of Auschwitz. Elie Wiesel's *Night* tells of survival through silence as a protest against the cruelties of the Nazis who debased and dehumanized the Jews in the concentration camps. He is seriously dealing with the nature of absurdity as he says: "We must invent reason; we must create beauty out of nothingness. " (Judaism 299) Elie Wiesel survived the Holocaust quite perplexed and bewildered like haunted be protagonists of

Camus and Becket. His fictional protagonists are haunted by the guilt consciousness and don't know whether to marry or not; or father children or even live after the Holocaust. The cruelties of the Nazis in concentration camps compel the survivors to question the existence of God in this universe. Wiesel raises this question of the divine justice and morality of God. Wiesel is a witness messenger as observes that: "Each of us carries a long procession of ghosts." After Auschwitz nothing seems stable as uncertainty and absurdity of life gripped the psyche of the survivors.

If we read the memoirs, diaries and interviews of Elie Wiesel it becomes clear that the act of recounting the Holocaust experience is a personal struggle. His major works include *The Town Beyond the Wall*, *The Fifth Son*, *The Testament*. His latest novel *The*

Sonderberg Case and *Heritage* were published in 2012. Wiesel is confronted with the forces of evil engulfing the world. Wiesel has no choice but to tell the world about the hellish life of Auschwitz. He observes thus expressing his concern for being a witness:

I remember; during those years, when we were dreamless old children in a kingdom called Night, we had but one wish left but it was a burning desire: to bear witness. (*Night* 14)

Interestingly Wiesel emerges as the "spiritual archivist of the Holocaust" (*Night* 16). Wiesel realizes his moral responsibility to fulfill the last wish of the dying prisoners as he observes: "I write in order to understand as much as to be understood."

(*Night 17*)_His testimony has moral and spiritual purpose. His approach is humanistic for he believes that his witness may diminish the amount of suffering in the world. He further reminds the readers that “We didn't write for any accepted purpose except for the extraordinary purpose of saving mankind.” (*Night 18*) Wiesel’s purpose in writing his memoirs and novels is twofold. He wants to bear the witness and his testimony will be like a safety valve to release the tensions from his psychic pressures. His testimony pricks the conscience of the readers:

Mainly, my position in the Jewish community is really the position of a witness from within and a defender from without. This goes, of course, along with my ideas about the duties and the privileges

of a storyteller of a writer.

(*Night 19*)

Wiesel believes that the Nazis were the manifestation of evil and their main purpose was to destroy the values of civilization from the world. Wiesel has described the apocalyptic scenes which horrifies us: “I trod on bodies fallen to the ground. I trod on smashed faces. But I could hear no scream, just a few moans. My father and I were crushed down by the mob rolling like a wave...I desire to live had gathered in my nails. (*Night 153*) Wiesel has faithfully documented the plight of the prisoners in his novel. He had lost faith in God as the satanic forces had grown very powerful. Nietzsche had written that “God is dead”, the prisoners were also quite nihilistic and pessimistic since there seemed to be no end of agony. Elie Wiesel is also known for political activism; he has done valuable social and

humanitarian projects. He is committed to speak for those who are unable to speak about their traumatic sufferings. "...so much darkness that we want to bring some light to it or, at least, to give an intensity to the darkness. There is so much suffering that we try, at least, to evaluate it and see where it comes from, if not to redeem it. (*Night* 67)

Wiesel's novel *Night* begins with the coming of the Germans to Sighet dramatizing the tragedy of the Holocaust on the Jewish community. In *Dawn*, Wiesel focuses on the moral problems of the battle to fight for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. His hero is ashamed at having survived the dead. His protagonist thinks that his life is absurd like fire that burnt his mother and father and sister. His *Night* is a powerful novel because his act of recollection is suffused with a sense of deep mystery. Wiesel cannot understand that just in one

night all his faith; history of Jewish culture and peaceful family was transformed into a column of white smoke. Elie Wiesel believes that the evil of Holocaust is impenetrable but with the power of storytelling. Wiesel gives a blend of beauty and suffering. In narrating his story Wiesel uses Conrad's words "speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder; to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity and beauty and pain." (Gerald Green 159.)

In *Night* of Elie Wiesel, the Jew is used as a metaphor to depict the sufferings of humanity. He has depicted the alienation; displacement; homelessness; death and destruction of innocent people by the Germans. Wiesel uses his creative powers to immortalize the sufferings of the prisoners of Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Innocent small children were tossed

in the chimney and the memory of such situations cannot be forgotten so easily and his novels and memoirs create a plausible link between past and present, between man and Man, and between man and God.

To conclude, the historical facts narrated by Elie Wiesel give fresh insight into the Holocaust literature. 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). Wiesel observes thus: “Not to transmit what one sees, feels and experiences in a fundamental human event is a gift to death (*Night* 174).

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