

Gehenna: A Biopolitical Study of Rezak Hukanovic's *The Tenth Circle of Hell*

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Abstract

Non-fiction, as a literary genre, has been a portal to view the darker dungeons of society via words. Politics emerged parallel to human civilisation and sustained throughout evolution. Partially, it remained as an isolated entity, managing the administration of the state without its indulgence in human life. Yet, the history has also witnessed the interference of politics in human body in instances such as genocide, medical experiments etc., Ethnic cleansing, in the same metal, has been a recurring event from time to time across the world. RezakHukanovic's memoir, *The Tenth Circle of Hell* addresses one such intrusion in which the Bosnian government controlled the life of lakhs of people in the concentration camps in an act of ethnic cleansing. This book gives a bird's eye view into the obscure fate of prisoners in Omarska concentration camp which is considered to be a man-made hell. Biopolitics by Michel Foucault hypothesised the concept of politics on the human body and deprivation of human will. It brings to limelight that the human body is undermined and considered to be a property that can be destroyed by the political forces. Concentration camps are exclusively formed miniatures of society where laws are not applicable leading to innumerable injustices levied on living beings. This research paper will validate the book by applying the chosen theory to show how power builds an ersatz inferno to inflict violence on the physical frame of mortals.

Keywords: Death; Hell; Omarska; Power; Torture.

Raphael Lemkin, witnessing the 1933 Assyrian mass murders in Iraq coined the term genocide and called it a barbaric act. In Jacqueline Ching's *Genocide and the Bosnian War* published in 2009, genocide is defined as "the murder of a group of people, along with the destruction of their homes, place of worship, and livelihood, as well as their personal freedom and

dignity” (6). During the reign of Henry the VIII, there were almost seventy two thousand executions, witch hunts killed around forty thousand people, fifteen million Native Americans were massacred and African slave trade led to sixty million deaths. With context to ethnic cleansing, Jewish Holocaust remains the most notable and eerie occurrence in modern world history. Hitler’s search for the final solution coerced the extermination of six million European Jews.

Bosnia and Serbia, formerly part of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, had been dealing with internal ethnic conflicts for a very long period. Following World War II, Yugoslavia was liberated into different Balkan states such as Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia and Macedonia. The 1990 election kindled the ethnic tension which resulted in Bosnian Serbs taking control of the nation. This further ignited the extermination mission which targeted the Muslims in Bosnia. The attacks began at Srebrenica and gradually spread to other regions and in 1995, 8000 boys and men were killed and lakhs of multitudes ended up as refugees in neighbouring lands. The UN Peacekeeping forces ventured to halt the bloodshed and the Dayton Peace Accords were signed after a prolonged negotiation in 1995.

Bosnian genocide was unrecognised by the world for a protracted time period until media, court and literature extended its hands. Literature particularly did play an enormous part in displaying the rampage against Bosnian Muslims to the world. Some significant works that voiced for this genocide are Roy Gutman’s *A Witness to Genocide*, David Rieff’s *Slaughterhouse*, David S. Rhode’s *Endgame*, Michael Sells’s *The Bridge Betrayed* and the like. Movies that dealt with the same theme are *As if I Am Not There* by Juanita Wilson, *Grbavica* by Jasmila Zbanic, *Halima’s Path* by Arsen Anton Ostojic, *Shot through the Heart* by David Attwood among others. Non-fiction such as memoir, documentaries, and autobiographies were also made and written by the survivors themselves.

The Tenth Circle of Hell: Memoir of Life in the Death Camps of Bosnia by Rezak Hukanovic and translated by Colleen London and Midhat Ridjanovic was published in 1993. Rezak was captured on 30th May, 1992 from Prijedor and taken to Omarska concentration camp. Along with multiple other prisoners who were physically tortured for almost a year in the man-made hell, the author endured intense, unimaginable and inhumane assaults. Scarcity in food, shelter, water, hygiene and the uncertainty in life tormented the victims immensely. They were refugees within their own homeland and had to depend on the authorities to live the next min-

ute. Later, they were all shifted to Manjaca camp and released after being ripped off their privacy, freedom, mental and physical health, jobs and the like. The nightmarish life in the camps made the author let the world know that pessimistic politics could doom and erect a hell of its own for the minorities of the society.

Anthropological, sociological, psychological and researchers of other fields shared their contributions in discussing the genocide of Bosnia. Ruth E. Dominguez talks about Rezak's experience in the camp and how he made sure that the readers should be aware of victimisation, human rights violation and hope for survival in her article entitled "*RezakHukanovic: Witness and Survivor in the Tenth Circle of Hell*". AjlaDemiragic and EdinHodzic in their 2014 article, "*The Bleak Visions of Literary Justice for Survivors of Srebrenica: Examining the Fictional Narratives of Srebrenica Genocide in the Light of the Insights from Transitional Justice*", interprets the strategies and interventions that could enhance the ways in which the fictional narratives of the Bosnian genocide can be conceived. Yet, there exists a gap in research which dealt with Bosnian ethnic cleansing in a biopolitical approach.

The Omnibus Homo Sacer by GiorgioAgamben is a collection of critical works by the author on Biopolitics published in the year 2017. Agamben defines biopolitics as "The ancient right to kill and to let live gives way to an inverse model, which defines modern biopolitics, and which can be expressed by the formula to make live and to let die" (816). The theory shows the intersection between politics and human life in which every human will is governed entirely by societal dictators. The centre of biological domination is considered to be concentration camps which Hannah Arendt puts forth in her *Essays in Understanding* (1994) as "The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination, for human nature being what it is, this goal can be achieved only under the extreme circumstances of human made hell" (240). Annexing to the notion of man-made hell, the chosen book revolves around the life of the author in the Omarska camp which has all the instances of biopolitical dominance.

The title, *The Tenth Circle of Hell* itself, candidly refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy* published in the year 1306. Dante, in his narrative poem created his version of hell and stated that there were nine concentric circles each possessing layers of punishments based on the sins committed. The ninth and the terminal circle is the inordinately vicious part where the traitors are trapped in the frozen lake of ice forever. With context to this, Rezak has

named the book as the tenth circle denoting that it is worse than the inferno in its treatments which Elie Wiesel in the foreword of the book discloses as "Hell consists not of nine circles, but of ten. Rezak Hukanovic takes you to the latest one, the most dreadful and the most heartbreaking" (v). Radovan Karadic, the leader of Serb Democratic Republic, formed camps in regions of the nation and appointed guards for the extermination process of Muslims and Croats.

Overnight, the whole city of Prijedor was under the control of Serb forces, neighbours turned into foes, soldiers took weapons to slaughter their fellow countrymen and such related diabolical acts were on the rise. Political propagandas instigated hatred among the citizens turning them into current adversaries which can be evidently seen through the words of the author such as:

Such Serbs were even ready to drive out their relatives – brothers---and sister-in-law – to expel them from land and homes inhabited by their families for centuries, not recognizing the utter mindlessness and folly of such politics. Because of them, the old border land had become swollen with corpses (102).

An exclusive regime with rules was formed within the camps making it a miniature of the larger society but with policies that are contemplated as human rights violations in a democratic culture. Homo Sacer, according to ancient Roman law, is a sacred man who cannot be sacrificed yet if he is killed, the murderer will not be convicted. Every prisoner in the Omarska camp were Homo Sacer as the guards inside were authorised to kill them at any time with no justifiable argumentation. The discriminated group was taken into this purgatory and from that moment, their lives were wholly disciplined by the authorities. Zoran Zigic, a guard, is believed to have slaughtered around two hundred people including children.

White House in the camp is the torture chamber where the cruellest acts were performed on the prisoners and a yellow van is used to dispose the deceased. Seizing the victim's belongings was a common routine for the guards and the ones who were not able to afford any money were either killed or tortured. The leader of the force pronounced orders that show that in concentration camps, no law can be applied such as "Take no pity let's go/ kill that scum down in the city" (56). Biologically they inflicted political sovereignty on the victims such as mutilating intimate organs, burning people alive, breaking the ribs of the alive, hitting the open wounds with jet water and dreadfully ravaging them by letting them suffer with thirst and hunger. In *Bosnian Genocide*, a reference guide edited by Paul R. Bartrop published in 2016, the basic livelihood deprivation in

the camps are very seemingly stated as "Conditions at both camps were harsh and inhumane, with severe overcrowding, inadequate medical and sanitary facilities, insufficient food and water, deficient ventilation, and, in the summer, suffocating heat" (246).

Humanity found its cave inside the camp with the aid of the guards. Numerous instances from the book give a view into the necrosis of human attitude such as starving the prisoners for four straight days. There were no private spaces for bodily needs, they had to sleep standing erect as there was not enough room, and they were left with bare bodies. All these showcase the inhabitable situations inside which were just adverse to their previous lifestyle. The misery was not deferred only with physical torments which the author puts forth as "Beating and cursing, cursing and beating, and constant humiliation, the most painful wound that can be inflicted on a human being" (55). Rezak was taken to the White House once and fortunately he returned to his dorm. His recovery took twenty whole days when the prisoners had to carry him to the outhouse, steal food from the canteen as he was not able to walk, incapacitated by the torture that he had endured. Injuries were deep-seated as he was crushed with metal balls until the guard himself had to take a break and fan himself before resuming.

Biopolitics, in its entirety, focuses on exposing man's sovereignty over humans who they think deserve to be killed. With context to the biopolitical outlook, the guards who torture, consider themselves to be the sole dictator who is authorised to wreck any prisoner's life with no punishment as the aftermath. In Jean Amery's *At the Mind's Limits* published in the year 1966, he dismantles the mentality of the torture as "He has control of the other's scream of pain and death; he is master over flesh and spirit, life and death" (35). Rezak illustrates the evidence of the above statement throughout his book which indeed is a classic precedent of Biopolitics in the camp such as "They killed people for the hell of it, without the least pretext. If they didn't like a prisoner's face or the way he moved, it was all over" (80). The most flagrant guard of the Omarska camp was Zoka. He hammered a nail with a wooden stick into the heels of the prisoners and ordered them not to remove it, leaving them to die of excruciating pain.

"Dying was easy at Omarska, and living was hard" (73), said the author while sharing his horrifying witness to agonising deaths of his fellow beings. The political despotism was a result of overwhelming ascendancy given to the guards. This kind of nefarious authority was not just found in the Bosnian camps but also in other camps such as Nazi concentration camps. This analogy becomes evident when Viktor E. Frankl spoke about it in his work *Man's Search for Meaning* published in the year 1959 as "The

prisoners saw themselves completely dependent on the moods of the guards—playthings of fate—and this made them even less human than the circumstances warranted” (64). The guards’ torture deducts the hope for survival from the victims. The region of the camps may differ and the methods of torture may differ, yet the biopolitical approach enforced on human body remains the same.

Another correlation between the two camps becomes apparent when both the authors assert their mental trauma inside the camp. Rezak, in his work *The Tenth Circle of Hell* says that, “The men were aching from their wounds. But the wounds on their souls were even deeper and more painful than those on their bodies” (116). Parallel to this, Viktor E. Frankl in his seminal work *Man’s Search for Meaning* puts forth the same emotions as “At such a moment it is not the physical pain which hurts the most (and this applies to adults as much as to punished children); it is the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all” (36). Irrespective of whether the camp is in Bosnia or Auschwitz and whether the victims are Bosnian Muslims or Jews, the impact of Biopolitics on the human body and psyche remains universal. Infernal experiences the research article exposes is an affidavit that Biopolitics exploits the human body by imposing the power inside the man-made hell.

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