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Narrating Lives: Representation of Holocaust Trauma in Elie Wiesel's *Night*

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Abstract

We are living through an age of trauma in which we have witnessed acts of political violence, nuclear accidents, climate crises, and recently the global corona virus pandemic. Life-writing forms an important medium of coping with traumatic experience. It not only enables healing but also helps in reassessment of historical knowledge and cultural trauma. Additionally, they serve as an antidote to universalizing narratives of suffering provided by media reports and State accounts. These eventually can go on to influence legislation and policy making. In this light, we will look at narrative reconstruction of the Holocaust done in Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1958).

Keywords: Holocaust; Narrative; Trauma.

The idea of *Night* (1958) was conceived in 1945 following Wiesel's liberation from Buchenwald but the work wasn't written till he met French Catholic writer Francois Mauriac for an interview and during a conversation between the two there was a mention of the sufferings of Christ by Mauriac to which Wiesel responded by recounting the agonies suffered by the Jews in concentration camps. The French writer did not counter but encouraged his young interviewer to write about his experience. The first account of his experience was called A*nd the World Remained Silent* (1956). It was 800 pages long and written in Yiddish. Later he shortened it and wrote a French version which was called *La Nuit* or *Night* and was published in 1958. Two years later the English translation appeared in the United States. *Night* is an account of the catastrophic experience of the Jews written from the point of view of an individual who had seen his mother, little sister and other extended family disappear in a furnace; and he had witnessed his father experience martyrdom every single day and finally die in the most agonizing manner. The author recounts the events

that scarred his mind and body. He talks about the initial denial of the community to the dangers that were increasingly becoming evident, the inability to perceive the seriousness of the threats of the Nazis, and the refusal to believe a witness who relates to his people what he has been through. He reprimands the world for turning a blind eye to the atrocities committed by the Germans. He testifies to the crises of faith that he experienced when he was in the camps and prays for a more humane world. And, he warns the generation alive and yet to come of the horrors that humankind might witness again if they don't learn their lessons.

The story begins in 1941 in Sighet, a small town in Transylvanian Romania, where Elie Wiesel was born in 1928 to a religious family. It opens with an evocation of the traditional East European way of life and describes the boy's relationship with Moshe, the synagogue beadle, who becomes his informal instructor in Kabbalah.Their yearning for the return to Zion of the Shekhinah will bring redemption. In that future redemption, the original cosmic rupture in Eden will be repaired, so that according to the Zohar, the redemption of Israel is similar to the redemption of God himself form his mystic Exile. In the Hassidic melodies that Moshe the Beadle chants, Wiesel hears the ancient lament of the Jews for deliverance. In the contents of Moshe's chant, Wiesel presents three things: First, he reveals the central idea of the Kabbalah. According to the Kabbalah, the shekhinah or Divine Presence, is in exile together with the people of Israel. God has been exiled by the actions of men; God suffers; God's return depends on humankind's return from its own exile, the original expulsion from Paradise. In losing Paradise humankind also lost God and God also lost humankind.

Through a study of the sacred texts, one can step into a realm of purity and move one step closer to God and to some extent restore the lost Paradise. It is a step to bring back God from exile and when that happens evil begins to perish. Secondly, he foreshadows the events of the *Night* and suggests the reason for their occurrence: the absence of God. The crimes committed by the Nazis are a testimony to the Godless situation that Eliezer and his people find themselves in. The atrocities experienced under the Nazi regime are a manifestation of being exiled from Paradise. Third, Wiesel highlights the need to restore Paradise. He asserts that Hell as experienced by his people is a human creation and therefore, the responsibility to restore Paradise has to be undertaken by humankind. Harold Bloom compares Wiesel's position to that of John Milton while writing Paradise Lost. He observes that like Milton relates to his readers how the Paradise was lost and eventually regained, Wiesel does a similar job and describes the

condition of the Godless world, and through his writing wants to deliver humankind from suffering and restore God's position in the world. Thus, by contextualizing the present situation withing the religious framework of the Jews, Wiesel asserts how religion informs our understanding of the present and sets the tone for the catastrophic events that follow.

Eliezer's encounter with Moshe also reflects the continuity of culture. Eliezer is looking for someone who could teach him the Kabbalah but is disappointed on learning that there were no Kabbalists in Sighet, and also the Sages have advised against beginning the study of the Kabbalah before the age of thirty. On learning about the young boy's disappointment, Moshe decides to teach him about the Kabbalah because he senses a seriousness in him. He, however, tells him, "there are a thousand and one gates allowing entry into the orchard of mystical truth. Every human being has his own gate. He must not err and wish to enter the orchard through a gate other than his own." (Wiesel 5) This warning by Moshe foreshadows the trajectory of events about to come and gives an important message for everyone: amidst a series of overpowering events, one must give the meaning to them based on their own experience. Apart from giving this message of spiritual sustenance in the dark times, Moshe is also a harbinger of the dark times, After escaping death at the hands of the Nazis, he warns the rest of the town and describes his harrowing experience:

"Jews, listen to me! That's all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me!" (Wiesel 7)

As a foreign Jew residing in Sighet, Moshe was transported before the other Jews. They dug their own graves and tumbled into those very graves when they were shot by the Gestapo. He is wounded and left for dead and returns to tell his tale. But, the Jews of Sighet do not listen or they refuse to believe or think that he is a madman spreading rumors or simply pity him. Here, it is pertinent to note that Holocaust has been described as an event without a witness because the Nazis didn't leave anyone alive to testify and those who survived couldn't tell the tale because the catastrophe couldn't be comprehended by them in its totality. Also, in their seminal work titled *In an Era of Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1991), Shoshana Felman and DoriLaub have stated that testifying to something that one has witnessed with their own eyes is difficult because time and memory intervene between the moment of witnessing and moment of testifying. Additionally, Felman and Laub note that the fear that the traumatic experience will repeat itself prevents them from talking about it. The act of sharing and telling itself becomes

traumatizing. Laub's studies also revealed that the survivors wanted to survive because they wanted to tell their stories and also more importantly they needed to tell their story so that they could survive. Therefore, Moshe is desperate to tell his story and warn the residents of Sighet of their impending fate.

Wiesel presents a series of vignettes, scenes, events and responses in his narrative and describes how he confronts his anger, disbelief and fear at various instances. At the heart of the narrative, lies the frustration about the inability to comprehend the surroundings and the desperation to make sense of what defies rational understanding. Wiesel then recounts that his father had declined an opportunity to emigrate to Palestine while they still had time and he had also refused the offer of help by their house maid. He remembers how the Jews of Sighet believed that normalcy had been restored. But, eventually they are moved to a ghetto where they are permitted to continue their regular lives and then they are transported to a concentration camp. He recalls how people summoned their family members to assemble for deportation, and how the police would storm into the ghettoes and force people out onto the streets. As he reflects, the author-narrator points out that the Jewish persons were not aware of the enormity of the pain and torture that awaited them. He recollects the commotion on the night before deportation and notes that all of it was taking place "under a magnificent blue sky." (Wiesel 15) Harold Bloom appreciates Wiesel's style of narration as he doesn't limit the event within the range of narrator's perception or the Jewish experience but locates it in the larger world. This heightens the isolation of the Jews from their larger environment. The narrator also remembers the response of his community with a feeling of surprise. He is amazed to think that the Jews were filled with joy when deportation started after a long wait. There were optimistic perspectives too according to which they were inching closer to evacuation; some even thought the whole exercise was a farce. As he writes, he realizes that no one believed in those consolatory conversations. They were a kind of survival strategy to overcome fear albeit temporarily. Lucy Daxidowicz observes:

"The wish to live. The inability to believe in one's own imminent death, the universal human faith in one's own immunity to disaster- all these factors conspired to make the Jews believe that resettlement, not death, was the fact… Not gullibility, or suggestibility, but universal human optimism encouraged them to believe in the deceptions that the Germans perpetrated. (Dawidowicz 306) In the process of repressing and denying the overpowering threat that confronted them, perpetual distortion and

skewed interpretation based on wishful thinking managed to reconcile the illogic and inconsistencies of their fears and hopes. Without accurate information, without corrective feedback from authoritative sources on the course of events, their isolation helped give credence to their distorted and distorting evaluation of their predicament. This mechanism of denial, this arming oneself against disquieting facts, was not pathological, but as psychologists point out, a tool of adaptation, a means of coping with an intolerable situation in the absence of any possibility for defensive action. The alternative was despair, the quiet stunned reaction of the defeated.

As they are being transported from one destination to the next till they finally reach the cattle cars in which they are herded towards the concentration camps, the author-narrator describes the sights and sounds around him: the synagogue was in shambles, the altar desecrated, and forbidden to go outside, people urinated and defecated in the corner of the premises. Inside the cattle cars, there was not enough room to sit or lie down. After two days of travelling, the train stopped at the Czechoslovakian border where Hungarian police transferred the Jews to German police. This was the beginning of the carnivalesque reality that was to become a permanent fixture of their lives in the times to come. Wiesel retrospectively comments:

"We had fallen into a trap, up to our necks." (Wiesel 24)

In the cattle car, on the way to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Madam Schachter imagines a fire (not once but twice) outside the window. People counter her claiming that she is hallucinating and try to silence her but she persists in her declarations. When the convoy arrives at Auschwitz, they can see fire rising from the chimneys. The initial refusal to believe Moshe and the efforts to silence Madame Schachter represent a denial of the reality until the people witness it first hand.

Later Eliezer sees flames emanating from a pit where babies were being eliminated. And, he recalls contemplating suicide after witnessing the gruesome reality of the concentration camps: babies being annihilated in the burning ditch, people chanting the Kaddish for those that are dead and for themselves-the living dead, older inmates striking the new ones with sticks, young men forced to place the bodies of their own fathers into the furnace and the world being silent to the horrors. But, instinct for survival prevails. He pledges never to forget and this urge to remember transforms him into a witness. Ellen S. Fine in *Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel* writes observes:

"The moment of arrival designates the end of reality-oriented structure of outer night, and the shift to inner night, in which time is suspended." (Fine 15)

Blunted by blows, the naked men lose their concern for their families, lose their pride, and lose their sense of self-preservation. They enter what feels to the young Wiesel like an "antechamber of Hell" (Wiesel 34) where they were "damned souls wandering through the void, souls condemned to wander through space until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion, without any hope of finding either." (Wiesel 36) As he reflects, he realizes that the concept of time had changed and there was a dissolution of the sense of self. Wiesel revisits the routine of the camps: the day beginning at 5 when they were beaten out of the barracks by kapos who themselves were prisoners (both Jewish and others) but given authority over the Jewish inmates they exercised their power with complete brutality, inmates being subjected to a treatment of disinfectants, then sent for shower and clothes handed over to them in a random fashion without consideration for sizes. Also, the prisoners were addressed by numbers and not their names. This dehumanizing treatment leads Wiesel to conclude that they had ceased to be men. Primo Levi asserts that this dehumanization precedes physical murder of men and he calls this impact of the concentration camp world on human body and spirit the "demolition of a man." (Levi 32) He says that such an individual who is deprived of people he loves and the things he possessed loses himself easily. He adds that such a person is destroyed twice: first psychically and then physically. And, the endemic brutality makes him believe that they were suspended in time. Every day was like the others: prisoners beaten, humiliated, and tortured. Though the days were passing, yet to the inmates it seemed as if one perpetual night continued bringing in one horror after the other.

The environment at Auschwitz felt surreal. Amidst the forces of horror and terror, the narrator and his father served as lifelines for each other. From the very beginning, the fifteen year old Wiesel's greatest fear was the separation from his family. Separated from his mother and sisters upon their arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the narrator's sole target is to remain united with his father. The narrator revisits various instances when the father's presence stops him from dying. When Eliezer walks past the pits of fire on his first night in Auschwitz, he contemplates suicide. The voice of his father at that moment acts as a life force and prevents him from taking his life. During the march from Buna to Gleiwitz, the inmates are supposed to walk through the snow and the narrator is in excruciating pain because of his foot and he thinks of succumbing to his pain when he

realizes that how would his father manage without his support. His father's need of him overpowers his desire to get rid of his pain permanently. After running for around seventy kilometers, when Wiesel rests, and almost sinks into the soft snow when his father stops him from sleeping in the snow that would mean freezing to death. On another occasion, when men pile up on each other in the barracks, Eliezer struggles to get himself rid of the weight and suffocation and his first words are addressed to his father whose response is again a source of reassurance to him. Similarly, there are moments when the son looks out for the father: when Eliezer's father was taken for dead in the train to Buchenwald and was about to be thrown away with the other corpses when Wiesel revives him to show that he was still alive. The narrator also feeds his father when he is beaten by other inmates. Though the father-son support each other amidst the horrors of the camp yet the sanctity of the relationship is compromised by the camp conditions. Ellen S Fine notes that:

"The Nazi technique of attempting to eradicate all family ties and creating a state of mind in which men view each other as enemies or strangers-what can be called the concentration camp philosophy-is demonstrated in *Night* through a series of incidents showing the competition for survival between fathers and sons." (Fine 21)

According to Jewish Mythology, Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his only son Isaac as a part of his trials of faith. Over the centuries, Jewish fathers sacrificed their Issacs during the massacres against the Jews, and the Hebrew poets recorded their martyrdom in the 'aqeda' poems. During the Holocaust, it was often the father who was sacrificed in front of the son. This reversal of roles has been interpreted by Andre Neher as an 'anti-Aqeda' and he notes, 'aqeda has been reversed and Isaac leads the aged Abraham on a forced march, prodded by SS whips, to the sacrifice, but Abraham asks no questions.'

An inmate named Bela Katz is forced to shove the body of his own father into a furnace, a pipel beats his father because he doesn't make his bed properly, and Rabbi Eliahou's abandons his father after three years of staying in different camps. Wiesel prays that he retains strength and moral judgement to never do what Rabbi Eliahou's son did to him. He stays dedicated towards his father yet there is a perpetual fear that haunts him: the fear that his value system might get altered for the worse because of the camp conditions and that the instinct for survival might overpower love for his father. There are occasions when his father is struck by the Kapo yet Wiesel doesn't retaliate and chooses to be a silent observer. On

being separated from his father in Buchenwald, Eliezer doesn't search for him. The responsibility of looking after his father gets too much for him and he unconsciously desires to get rid of it. He feels ashamed about it later. After his father has died, he has ambivalent feelings of pain and liberation. Eventually guilt plagues him for not being able to save the father and for having felt liberated after his death. The survival guilt of Eliezer is also represented when he looks at his face in the mirror at the end of this narrative. He feels as if a corpse is staring at it which is indicative of that dead part of his self which was engulfed during the stay at the concentration camps.Scholars have also interpreted his identification with his dead father through the reflection. Robert Jay Lifton has stated that survival guilt is related to the process of identification-the survivor's tendency to incorporate within himself an image of the dead, and then to think, feel and act as he imagines they would. According to Ellen S. Fine, the mirror image epitomizes Eliezer's state of mourning and his desire to join his father, whose death is experienced as a death of self.

As the narrative progresses, we see that the narrator becomes increasingly desensitized, and his sense of alienation and distance from God increases. In the beginning, the narrator is a student of the Talmud, keen on learning about the Kabbalah. But, his faith is tested the moment he enters the concentration camp and is confronted with the sight of infants burning. He questions God in anger:

"Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank him for?" (Wiesel 33)

On another occasion when a young boy is hanged after a sabotage attempt, other inmates are made to watch him die. Everyone questions the existence and mercy of God as they behold this gruesome sight. And, a voice within Eliezer answers that God was right there, hanging on the gallows. This could be a reference to the crucifixion of Christ or the Nietzschean concept of the death of God or the Jewish belief that redemption will be possible when there will be absolute evil or absolute righteousness. With every subsequent injustice and horror of the concentration camp, Wiesel puts God to trial and demands answers. The narrator revisits those moments that reflect his defiance of the Almighty. The Jewish New Year or Rosh Hashanah is a day to celebrate the creation of the universe and seek forgiveness for your sins. The narrator remembers the significance of this day in his life before Auschwitz and reflects on his present feelings for the occasion: instead of expressing gratitude, he accuses God. The Day of

Atonement called the Yom Kippur is considered the holiest day in Jewish calender and concludes the ten days of repentance that begins with the New Year. The Jews are supposed to observe a fast on this day. Wiesel refuses to fast as an act of revolt and also because his father asked him to. However, he did feel a void in his heart. The narrator also remembers how some inmates such as AkivaDrumer tells everyone that God is testing his people and his punishments are a symbol of his love for them. He says that from a Kabbalistic perspective, the messiah would come at a time of war or atrocity and therefore, people need not despair.

The narrative comes to a close with the death of the narrator's father and the liberation of Buchenwald by the Americans. The narrator reflects on his lack of emotion on the demise of his father and also on finally being free. There is no emotional expression of anger, pain, grief or revenge, just a need to gratify one's hunger.

"No thought of revenge, or of parents. Only of bread." (Wiesel 115)

People who die during a traumatic incident are luckier that people who survive it because those who live, live with fear, guilt, anxiety and anger which has gripped them forever. Catherine Malabou in her seminal work *The New Wounded* asserts that trauma causes changes in the structure of the subject and leads to the reformation of their psyche. She states that both the psyche and the identity are plastic in nature which means that they are metamorphosed by the impact of trauma. She explains that a traumatic experience destroys the subject's continuity in terms of history and memory but then this destruction also offers a new form of psychic life and this, she calls the formative power of the wound. The subject that is changed by the trauma also endures the trauma. In this case, it holds true for Wiesel-the author, narrator and survivor, Moshe the Beadle and others who have survived the horrors of the camps. Moshe was a good natured individual well versed in Jewish mysticism before he was deported to the camps. After he returned, he wasn't the same. He didn't speak of God or Kabbalah and only spoke about dispassionate and gruesome killings that he had witnessed. With joy and optimism lost, he only made repetitive efforts to share his story so that people might make efforts to save themselves while there was still time.Similarly, Wiesel revisits his own transformation from a spiritual, God-fearing boy who was a student of the Talmud to a Job-like figure who accuses God of abandoning his people. He puts together episodes showcasing his crises of faith and change in value system and knowledge system. He remembers how one dehumanizing experience after the other leads to a decay of memories and numbing

of the mind. Catherine Malabou calls this a crisis of empathy post-trauma. The unrelenting desire to remember and share the story to protest against the indifference of the world towards the Holocaust propels him forward.

Laub describes the Holocaust as an event without a witness because of the isolation of the concentration camp inmates and dehumanization that they are subjected to within the camps. He describes the testimony of a Holocaust survivor who claims that after the traumatic experience she has lost her ability to love or empathize or verbalize her experience and that her life has progressed in a distorted way. He notes:

"As the event of the Jewish genocide unfolded, however, most actual or potential witnesses failed one-by-one to occupy their position as a witness, and at a certain point it seemed as if there was no one left to witness what was taking place… it was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist." (Laub)

This is where literature and literary language serves an important purpose. Shoshana Felman argues that the imaginative quality of literary narrative allows it to access traumatic experience. Also, literary narratives can give a feel of the traumatic experience. And, when an author is a survivor, he is compelled to tell his story and represent those who perished and those who survived.

Night is among one of the many Holocaust narratives that emerged in the decade following the Holocaust. What sets it apart from other accounts is its brevity and the terse descriptions and plain language. Wiesel does not provide with detailed explanations and historical background. He relies on reader's knowledge of history to fill in that gap. Events are filtered through the eyes of the narrator who reflects on them as he organizes them into a coherent narrative. The adult narrator when he looks at the events that took place during the Nazi regime imposes a logical order on the fragmentary memories of his disturbing past. He begins by revisiting life in Sighet before the deportation; he recalls the arrival in Birkenau; he describes the first impressions in Auschwitz; then he recollects life in Buna; he follows it with the account of selections; he narrates how they moved to Gleiwitz and follows it with the journey to Buchenwald and concludes with the death of his father and the liberation of Buchenwald. The narrator interrupts his description of events and comments on them

directly showing the wisdom of hindsight. Also, as he looks at the events in retrospect, he is able to make greater sense of them and can explain what he did not know at the time of their occurrence. Moreover, when he looks at things retrospectively, he is able to give things a premonitory meaning (such as Madame Schater's vision of fire) and also gives a colour of warning to certain incidents like Moshe's desperate attempts to share his tale. The adult narrator also critiques his community for not taking steps that could have prevented some of them from being slaughtered. He also intersperses his narrative with references to Jewish religious practices and Jewish mythology to provide a framework to his account and at the same time highlight the irony of things.

Holocaust has been said to be one of those horrors in history that cannot be described. German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno in his work *Culture Criticism and Society* (1949) has famously stated that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Scholars have opined that he probably refers to the idea that concentration camp conditions were barbaric and also hints at the barbarism that is inherent in our culture that led to the Holocaust. He might have also meant that creative writing in the aftermath of the gruesome annihilation of the Jews will also be barbaric. This has also led eminent scholars to understand that language is not armed to narrate the Holocaust and thus, Adorno's idea exposes the crises within language and this further serves to inhibit the narration of the Holocaust into cultural memory because normal systems of meaning and signification have been overturned by the traumatic impact of the event. It is for this reason normal frames of reference cannot adequately represent the Holocaust. Therefore, we can say that the role of the writer has been drastically altered post-Auschwitz. They not only have to represent the experience but also look for new narrative structures to represent the brutal reality of the Jewish experience.

One significant aspect is that the use of chronological time for storytelling no longer aids the writer's narration of the tale. Also, scholars have pointed out that time depends on man's perception of reality. We can observe in Wiesel's account that his perception of reality changes both at the level of knowledge and at an experiential level as he moves from the world of the living to the domain of the dead, and consequently his representation of time also changes and becomes fragmented. Simon P. Sibelman has also suggested that we look at Wiesel's perception of time as reflective of his Hasidic background:

"Hasidic stories do not adhere to occidental conventions of temporal exi-

gencies, but create notions of time that are subordinated to the message of the tale. Metaphysics and mysteries reign, and the storyteller manipulates past and present to enhance particular moral themes." (Sibelman 101)

Wiesel's personal trauma mirrors the cultural trauma undergone by many people who lost their families, homes and faced immense difficulty in rebuilding their lives after the Holocaust. His account demonstrates that individual, cultural and political traumatic experiences are intertwined. His representation of the atrocities of the Holocaust establish a paradigm for traumatic representation. The traumatized, as Cathy Caruth says, carry an impossible history within them or they become the symptom of a history they cannot fully possess. Literary narratives such as *Night* not only help us revisit a traumatic historical period but also give a voice to its author and narrator Elie Wiesel who has survived the catastrophe. Many scholars have felt that the experience of Holocaust is beyond the capacity of language to represent it. However, authors such as Elie Wiesel who have written more than thirty works on the Holocaust feel that language may be imperfect but it is man's only available tool for expression and warning the future generations of the dangers of the Holocaust.

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