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# Holocaust or Genocide: A Reading of Elie Wiesel's 'Night'

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## ABSTRACT

The greatest human error of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which still haunts human in 21<sup>st</sup> century is the mass killing of Jews by the Germans during the World War II. Around six million Jews were brutally killed with silent observation of the whole universe. Many may pretend that they were ignorant about such mass killing due to the unrest at the war time. To some extent it was true as the Germans wanted to do it secretly. The horror of the Holocaust reached the world through the writings of the Holocaust survivors. Most of their writings were in other languages than in English. As most of the survivors were from the Europe, their writings were in Italy, French, Hebrew, Spanish and very less work in English. Here the role of translation is very crucial as the world became aware of the Holocaust. The hypothesis of the paper is to read the important translation of Holocaust Survivor Elie Wiesel's Memoir *Night* to present the horror of concentration camps. Moreover, it tries to read the politics behind the interest of such translations into English.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, Genocide, Jewish Community, Memory

The phrase 'Survival of the Fittest' though it meant 'natural selection'; humans have given negative meaning through their attitude towards power. In order to be in power, they go to the extent of killing fellow humans. The hunger for power has witnessed cruel treatment of humans since time immemorial. The brutal killing of red Indians in America, Aborigines in Australia, slavery of Africans, colonisation by the Europeans, nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Holocaust of Jews, civil wars in Sri Lanka, Africa, Syria, South and North Korea and now between China and Hong Kong stands as an example of the urge for power. Though this information was/is crossed by the humans without much importance in the day today world, somehow it haunts the humans. Moreover, literary

works in the form of fiction, non-fiction, memoir, letters, poetry, and auto-biography present the trauma undergone by the oppressed. Hence almost the whole world lives with guilt either for their mistake or for their ancestors. The present paper talks about such a mass killing that happened in the twentieth century which was aimed to erase an entire community from the world, the mass killing of the Jewish community by the Germans.

Atrocities on Jews are termed as anti-Semitism and the mass killing of the Jews is denoted as holocaust. The word holocaust etymologically derived from a Greek word means 'sacrifice by fire'. The enmity of Hitler against the Jewish community has led to the sacrifice of around six million Jews that is two-third of Jews in the concentration camps. Though the mass killing occurred from 1941 to 1945, the functioning of the concentration camps had started since 1933. This killing continued till the end of World War II and by May 8, 1945 it came to an end. The aftermath of Holocaust was more tragic as the survivors suffered with psychological problems. Many Jews migrated all over the world with the hope for better life, yet haunted with the trauma undergone in the camps. The Nazis utilized the World War II to kill the enemy troops as well as to exhibit their enmity with a particular community. The pain undergone by the Jewish community and the brutal treatment they experienced in the camps were kept secret by the Nazis. Even Poland who allied with German in the World War II was ignorant about it, though many Polish Guards were serving in the concentration camps. Some people merely knew about Hitler's atrocities on the Jews but not in detail. The horror of holocaust was brought to the notice of the world through the writings of the American

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soldiers (their experience of relieving the Jewish survivors from the concentration camps) and the translation of the works of the survivors from the concentration camp. The present paper aims to read a work of Holocaust Survivor Elie Wiesel's Memoir *Night* and the reasons behind the translation of Holocaust Literature in English.

Humans were/are interested in documenting their experiences either positive or negative to register it for the future generation. This is how history, memoir, autobiographical and biographical writings have started to emerge. Many psychoanalysts have shown interest in such kind of writing by trying to understand the objective and types of such writings. According to Maurice Halbwachs, the objective of memory writing is

The memory of a sequence of events may no longer have the support of a group: the memory of involvement in the events or of enduring their consequences, of participating in them or receiving a first-hand account from participants and witness may become scattered among various individuals, lost amid new groups for whom these faces no longer have interest because, the only means of preserving such remembrance is to write them down in a coherent narrative, for the writing remain even though the thoughts and the spoken word die(79).

Almost all the societies have such memory writings in order to preserve some information for the future generation. Similarly, the Jewish community of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wanted to preserve their sufferings not only for their future generation but to the entire world. Hence the survivors of the holocaust recorded their experiences in the concentration camp in writings. These works present both individual and collective memory of the Jewish community and their experiences in the concentration camps. Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* was written in Yiddish and later in French by the writer, which was later

translated into English to preserve individual memory to project the horror of Nazi camps.

Eliezar Wiesel (1928-2016) was born in a small village named Sighet in Hungary in 1928. He lived a comfortable life till the age of fifteen and was a theist. At the age of fifteen his entire village was deported to the Nazi concentration camp. While being transported to the Nazi camps, men and women were separated, where he got separated from his mother and three sisters. Eli stayed with his father in the concentration camp which motivated him to survive in various camps at Auschwitz, Buna, Buchenwald and Gleiwitz. Later due to hunger and disease his father died only a few months before liberation. After liberation, Elie was in the French orphanage and later he became a journalist in Paris. In France, he became acquainted with a French writer Francois Mauriac. Once in a conversation Mauriac was talking about the pain of Jesus again and again which outraged Elie Wiesel,

I said, "Mr. Mauriac"... "ten years or so ago, I have seen children, hundreds of Jewish children, who suffered more than Jesus did on his cross and we do not speak about it." I felt all of a sudden so embarrassed. ... And then, at the end, without saying anything, he simply said, "You know, maybe you should talk about it".

This incident enabled him to write his experiences. He wrote around 850 pages in Yiddish which was reduced to 245 pages and later it was further reduced to 120 pages. He gives his reason for writing this memoir as

I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer- or my life, period- would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory (ii).

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He found trouble in publishing this work as many considered it a senseless work to burden the future with the past tragedies of the Jewish(viii), but once he published his work in English, he became a renowned writer. He has written 57 books and his writing deals with the issues of fight, hatred, racism and genocide.

To write his memoir *Night*, Elie took around ten years as it was impossible to present the pain and trauma undergone by them in writing. He states in the preface to his memoir as,

Writing in my mother tongue- at that point close to extinction- I would pause at every sentence, and start over again. I would conjure up other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It still was not right. But what exactly was "it"? ... Was there a way to describe the last journey in sealed cattle cars, the last voyage toward the unknown? Or the discovery of a demented and glacial universe where to be inhuman was human, where disciplined, educated men in uniform came to kill, and innocent children and weary old men came to die? Or the countless separations on a single fiery night, the tearing apart of entire families, entire communities? Or, incredibly, the vanishing of a beautiful, well-behaved little Jewish girl with golden hair and a sad smile, murdered with her mother the very night of their arrival? How was one to speak of them without trembling and a broken for all eternity? (iii)

Elie Wiesel's *Night* is about his experience as a fifteen-year-old boy in the Nazi camp with his father at Auschwitz in 1944-45. It presents the pain of yellow stars, ghettos, cattle cars, selection, concentration camps and chimneys. The memoir begins in the year 1941, when Elie lived happily with his family. His small town was occupied by the native and foreign Jews. One day all the foreign Jews

were expelled by the Hungarian police in cattle cars. One from that group escaped and returned to Sighet and narrated his terrific experiences to Elie which enabled him to understand that some cruelty towards the Jews has started. The foreign Jews who were taken in trucks were taken to a forest. There, they were made to dig huge trenches and once the work was over, they were killed and left in those trenches by the Gestapo. People in Sighet did not take the words of the foreign Jew seriously and commented how such things will happen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1944, a new government came to power in Hungary who supported Hitler. With the new government's approval, German troops entered into Hungary. In Sighet, the Germans indulged in atrocities like arresting the Jewish leaders, prohibiting the Jews from leaving their houses, collecting valuables and gold from the Jewish household. All the Jews were forced to wear yellow star as a badge for identification. Then the German soldiers created ghettos in Sighet and shifted the people from their houses to the ghettos. The ghettos were encircled with barbed wires yet Elie feels that life in Ghetto was normal as they were made to live with their own people. People lived with hope that the war would end soon and they would be relieved by the red army. Against their anticipation, three weeks later the Jews in groups were deported from Sighet. Their journey to the concentration camps was a difficult one as there was no space to sit and little air to breathe as the cattle cars were filled with around hundred people. They reached Auschwitz at night and they were welcomed by the burning smell of flesh. Here the families got separated as they had separate camps for male and female and the children were asked to go with the mother. Once they enter the camps, selections began for the physically fit people; from the age eighteen to late forties, physically fit people were made to move to the right, and the rest to the left. Those who were moved on the right side went to the prison and on the left side ended up in crematoria. Mothers and children were taken to crematoria to burn in the burning flames the same night which was witnessed by Elie.

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In the camps they were asked to remove their dresses, shoes and later heads were shaved. They were ceased to call by names and they were given numbers; Elie's number was A-7713. They were made to live in hunger and made to believe that work will free them. Gradually they understood that work and fitness alone enabled them to live. From Auschwitz, Elie with his father was moved to a new camp Buna. They both passed in the selection and made to work as labours. In the camp, if someone violates the orders of the SS officers, they were hanged in front of the inmates as a warning. This is where Eli witnessed death and cruelty towards the fellow humans. All these experiences made Elie to question the belief in God. Continuous work and very little food made them weak but their love towards living motivated them to pass in the selection. As the Russian troops were reaching the camps, the prisoners from the camps were moved to other camps. Once when the Jews were moved to the centre of Germany, Buchenwald camp, they were starving even without water for three days. The pain of hunger could be well understood when the narrator states, "I was nothing but a body. Perhaps even less: a famished stomach. The stomach alone was measuring time. Our first act as free men was to throw ourselves onto the provisions. That's all we thought about. No thought of revenge, or of parents. Only of bread" (115).

Slowly his fragile body and hunger makes him to be selfish, to denounce the responsibility of taking care of his father. Due to weakness and sickness his father dies on Jan. 28, 1945 which made him actually to feel relieved. On April 11<sup>th</sup> 1945, the American soldiers freed them from the camps.

Elie's memoir presents his individual memory as a historical record. It gives the true picture of Nazi's brutal killing of the Jewish community. As mentioned in the beginning, holocaust means 'sacrifice by fire' and genocide is hybrid word of Latin and Greek means 'act of killing the whole race'. Based on the aim of Hitler, to annihilate the Jewish community from the earth, one

could understand that the killing of the Jews was not a religious sacrifice hence the correct term to call the mass killing is genocide or slaughter and not holocaust.

Most of the holocaust writings by the Jewish community were written in Yiddish, Spanish, German, Italy and less works in English. The Americans showed interest in translating the holocaust writings and publishing it in English. Moreover, the American soldiers, who returned from the World War II, wrote about the Nazi camps. The translation of holocaust literature in English enabled most of the people to know the horror of the world. It invokes the feel of empathy upon the fellow human beings and desire for a peaceful world. Yet Stef Craps' comparison of Holocaust with Freudian 'screen memories' raises a doubt about the purpose of translation of holocaust works in English. He states,

It can be argued that the enormous amount of attention paid to the Holocaust and the extraordinary importance attached to this event serve to blind Americans and Europeans to certain unpalatable aspects of their own history: the genocide of the Native Americans, slavery and segregation, nuclear warfare and the Vietnam war in the case of the United States; colonial history and collaboration with the Nazis in the case of the European countries (214).

This statement leaves one in confusion about the politics behind the translation and attention towards holocaust. Yet the pain of Jewish genocide could be understood through the readings of holocaust experiences. Such kind of works about negative memory motivates human to improve global justice and human rights.

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