

Writing as Resilience: Holocaust Trauma in Select Novels of Elie Wiesel

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: February

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 08.01.2024

Accepted: 10.02.2024

Published: 12.02.2024

Citation:

Ronald David, L.

“Writing as Resilience:

Holocaust Trauma

in Select Novels of

Elie Wiesel.” *Shanlax*

International Journal of

English, vol. 12, no. S1,

2024, pp. 83-86.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
english.v12iS1-Feb.7451](https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v12iS1-Feb.7451)

Dr. L. Ronald David

Assistant Professor, English

Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Trichy

“Most Consciences are satisfied quickly enough, and need only a few words in order to reach a definitive opinion of the unknowable” (111, Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*). Most trauma writings are considered as spring boards for furthering academic mileage or presenting a paper to inflate the curriculum vitae or credentials that fetch some perks. As a student of literature I always had a skeptical take on the confessional poetry of Kamala Dass which was otherwise categorized as erotic, revealing kind of writing and mostly not regarded as something important. But after reading novels on Armenian genocide, holocaust and world war , it became evident that people write about their trauma: collective, personal or social in order to inform, support and to convey a stronger message that writing is a way of displaying their solidarity and courage. To put in in William Faulkner’s terms, these writers prefer writing as resilience to reiterate that the past is not dead, infact it is not even past. Only a few care to read between the lines and it is important to learn why people write on trauma: personal, collective or generational which technically lie outside the boundaries of experience, unfathomable but welling up waves of perennial pain and horror that need to be vented but no specific ways or means can ever drain it out. By the time one finishes to understand the definition of trauma painted by the linguistic or symbolic yardsticks, it feels like mind draining activity. This paper tries to unravel the rationale of writing trauma and the reverberations of trauma through the select works of Elie Wiesel.

The more one attempts to erase something from memory, the more it haunts. Fortunately, literature serves as a forum cum vent for exchanging facts, experiences, feelings, and horrific memories shaped by suffering and tragedy. Trauma, a disruptive experience, has the potential to destabilize an individual’s emotional stability and perception. Trauma includes ethical, sociological, and political components that help us understand an experience that occurs unexpectedly and has the ability to make or destroy an individual or group. Why should literature address trauma? What could one gain from writing their traumatic experiences? These are the questions that this paper tries to unravel and discuss in detail through the works of a renowned holocaust novelist Elie Wiesel. Writing and reading

about trauma can offer a cathartic experience for both authors and readers. It allows individuals to express their emotions, process their experiences, and find a sense of relief or release through the act of storytelling.

Trauma studies, though a recurring area of study in cultural and literary studies, is losing its importance due to the lack of contemporaneity. This paper aims to bring out the importance of understanding trauma and its dimensions through the select novels of Elie Wiesel in order to draw greater attention to representations of extreme experience like holocaust, racial discrimination, rape, abuse, and social ostracization. This study holds water since trauma and writing about trauma is pertinent to our times of social upheaval, ecological catastrophes, pandemic and political unrest that have changed the entire fabric of humanness and human character. Trauma novels paints the brighter and darker side of humanity through self-reflection and appreciation.

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, examined the connection between writing and trauma in his writings, especially in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). Although trauma writing was not explicitly discussed by Freud, several of his theories can be understood in terms of the reasons why people who have suffered trauma might write. Freud thought that discussing terrible experiences can be healing. Catharsis, or the letting go of suppressed feelings, may result from the act of expressing and articulating one’s ideas and emotions. Writing can be viewed as a continuation of the “talking cure,” giving people a way to process and externalize their terrible experiences (Thornton, IEP).

Freud’s theory of defense mechanisms supports the notion that individuals may take up different psychological mechanisms to come to terms with distress. Writing is one of the constructive defense mechanism, allowing individuals to create a narrative that provides a sense of coherence and control over the chaotic and distressing aspects of their traumatic experiences. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud talked about the process of overcoming loss and grief. People who have experienced trauma can try to make sense of the events and their emotional impact through writing. It offers a disciplined and introspective setting for processing trauma.

In her groundbreaking book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth expanded the scope of trauma theory by investigating the communal and cultural components of trauma, building on Freud’s pioneering work. Caruth proposes the concept of “traumatic delay,” which holds that the full impact of the trauma may not be processed immediately, undermining the usual linear narrative of trauma. According to Caruth, trauma disrupts the linear passage of time, resulting in a gap between the trauma’s experience and knowledge. This delay has an impact not just on individual memory but also on communal memory and historical consciousness, influencing how entire communities tell their experiences.

Holocaust novels hold a special place in literature due to their ability to portray the harrowing experiences of individuals who have endured the darkest periods in human history—the Holocaust. The Holocaust, which occurred during World War II, was the systematic genocide perpetrated by Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime and its collaborators, resulting in the mass murder of six million Jews, as well as millions of other innocent people, including Romani people, Poles, Soviet POWs, disabled individuals, and others.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel is well-known for his profound literary achievements, especially his works on trauma, memory, and the Holocaust. Wiesel’s writings, which include his best-known book “Night,” are a reflection of his own experiences as a World War II survivor of the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps. Elie Wiesel’s work is deeply influenced by his personal experience of the Holocaust, and the trauma he endured during his imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. The trauma reverberations of his experiences can be seen throughout his writing, including his memoir *Night* and his novels such as *Dawn and Day*.

Novels by Elie Wiesel, especially the ones that deal with pain, might be viewed as examples of resilience. Wiesel used writing as a way to process the horrific experiences and deep difficulties he encountered during the Holocaust. One of the most powerful ways that tragedy reverberates in Wiesel's writing is his account of the Holocaust's psychological impact on survivors. Natan P. F. Kellerman says the word Holocaust in Hebrew means 'Shoah' referring to 'gigantic riddle' which still remains incomprehensible and beyond any rational explanation. The magnitude of holocaust is such that the trauma still remains trans -generational thus justifying why Jewish writers keep this theme as the center of their writing, not to cherish what they have gone through but writing for them is ambivalent : it provides a way to express and educate the readers of the cruelty a human could practice on another human fuelled by the desire to accumulate power and wealth , on the other hand , it serves as a therapeutic outlet that could, if ever, put them back to sanity and normalcy. Wiesel's protagonists frequently suffer from sentiments of remorse, shame, and survivor's guilt, and they are haunted by recollections of the crimes they observed and experienced. In *Night*, for example, Wiesel's protagonist, also called Elie Wiesel, struggles to reconcile his religion with the atrocities he experiences in concentration camps, and he is haunted by the memory of his father's death. These details and narration portrays Wiesel's resilience through his writing where in the face of dehumanization, he uses his experiences as a Holocaust survivor to affirm his identity and recover his voice. It is an expression of his resolve to let the horrific experiences he had silence him.

In Elie Wiesel's novel *The Accident*, the theme of trauma is central to the story. The novel follows the character of Eliezer, a Holocaust survivor who is haunted by his traumatic experiences and struggles to come to terms with them. One way that trauma is depicted in the novel is through Eliezer's dreams and flashbacks. Throughout the novel, Eliezer has vivid dreams of his time in the concentration camps, and these dreams often leave him feeling overwhelmed and disoriented. The novel also includes several flashbacks to Eliezer's time in the camps, which highlight the severity of the trauma he endured.

Another way that trauma is explored in the novel is through the character of Lieberman, a survivor of a different kind of trauma - the loss of his family in a car accident. Like Eliezer, Lieberman is deeply affected by his experiences, and he struggles to come to terms with the loss of his loved ones. The novel draws parallels between the trauma of the Holocaust and the trauma of Lieberman's loss, suggesting that all forms of trauma have lasting effects on those who experience them. Writing can be a therapeutic outlet for Wiesel, a way to process and cope with trauma. By putting his memories on paper through the fictional characters, Wiesel engaged in a form of self-expression that allowed him to confront and make sense of the incomprehensible suffering he witnessed. By delving into characters' experiences of trauma, literature enables readers to empathize with the struggles and challenges faced by others. This empathy can lead to increased compassion and a greater willingness to support those who have experienced trauma.

A Literati finds solace and healing through literature. The objective of reading trauma through Literature can be traumatizing enough if we lose empathy and just read it with an objective to only to think contrapuntally and not realizing why such novels keep coming and why trauma finds itself a special place in Literature. Unless somebody writes their traumatic experience most of us will live in oblivion of the atrocities and other untold persecutions that jeopardizes the normalcy and values of human life and existence. Reading stories of resilience and recovery can inspire hope and provide a sense of connection for those navigating their own healing journey.

References

1. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. John Hopkins University Press, 2016.

2. Edkins, Jenny. Trauma and the Memory of Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
3. Freud, Sigmund. Beyond Pleasure Principle. Hoggarth Press, 1955.https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_Beyond_P_P.pdf
4. Kellermann, Natan P.F. Holocaust Trauma: Psychological Effects and Treatment. Universe New York, 2009.
5. Stephen P. Thornton. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP) (ISSN 2161-0002) University of Limerick, 22-01-2024.<https://iep.utm.edu/freud/>
6. Wiesel, Elie. Night, Hill and Wang, 2006.
7. Wiesel, Elie. The Accident. Noonday press, 1991.