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HOLOCAUST AND WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust also known as Shoah is a word of Greek origin meaning “sacrifice by fire”. Holocaust was a genocide during world war II in which Nazis aided by their collaborators murdered around six million European Jews between 1939-1945. In the years immediately following world war II, writers started writing the horrible life of ghettos and concentration camps. The earliest literary responses to Holocaust were in form of survivor’s account like Elie Wiesel and Tadeusz Borowski blended with fiction. Gradually writers like Aharon Appelfeld relied on allusion and allegory to depict the horrors of their experience. But what is to be reflected upon is, how a culturally civilized nation became a mass murderer. What is the impact of Holocaust on present world and how was such a pogrom possible. The paper studies the factors like race, religion etc used for mass killings by Nazi regime. The paper also attempts to trace the evolution of holocaust studies in literature since 1945.

Keywords: Holocaust, Jews, Nazi, Survivor.

INTRODUCTION:

Holocaust was an attempt to destroy Judaism or fundamental Jewish spirit. The origins of such a genocide and dictatorship can be understood from historical perspective. During First World War the full power of technology was used on the battlefields and later in World War II, war tactics changed genocides and mass killings were employed in destroying the enemies behind battle fronts. What was new was that exterminators were directed by educated and learned men. The victims were non-combatants selected primarily because of their racial origin. The Germans believed that Jews were a threat to “Aryan race “and to justify their genocide they perpetuated a discourse of Jewish inferiority. They started attacking Jews on basis of their race and targeted other groups because of their perceived racial and biological inferiority .These included Roma (gypsies), people with disabilities, and other ethnic groups like Soviet Poles and Black Jews. During Holocaust out of six million Jews, more than two million were women and children.

The basic notions of humanity were shaken to the core during Holocaust. It revealed the deep abuse of humanity. In Germany the destruction of Jews started when Hitler came to power in 1933. Holocaust stemmed from Nazi Anti-Semitic ideology which perceived Jews as fundamental threat to Europe and all of humanity. It started with development of international laws, rise of philosophical and literary doctrines, art and architecture. So we can say even language was politicized to legitimize exploitation of Jews. Anti-jews stereotypes became part of Nazi regime and penetrated in their narratives taking the help of religion, history and culture of western world. The religious discourses narrating the incident where Judas Iscariot ,a pupil of Christ who betrayed him

for money became a symbol of betrayal. Jews were considered dark and evil people. Even racial theories helped to justify the inferiority of Jews. These pseudo scientific theories and racism evolved in 19th C. This ideology of modern anti-Semitism claimed that all problems like communism, capitalism, etc stemmed from Jews. All such discourses were used as political tools.

Mass murder of Jews started in mid 1941. In early years of Nazi regime the socialist government established Ghettos. Life in a ghetto was different from where locals lived. Nobody could flee from a ghetto. It was a step to segregate Jewish population and Jews were expelled from economic, social and cultural arenas. Largest ghettos were setup in Warsaw and Lodz in 1940. Later on Nazis formed concentration camps and mass murder of Jews started around 1941. Nazis launched operation Barbarossa and invaded Polish and Soviet Russia territories resulting in the disappearance of Jewish communities that had flourished in Europe for almost 2000 years. In 1942 Jews were deported to Treblinka death camp and more than 80000 Jews died of hunger, disease and Nazi terror.

In their formulation of final solution the national socialist leaders didn't distinguish between men and women. While they initially targeted Jewish men for arrest and deportation but soon turned to men, women, children and old. According to Mary Felstiner "Along the stations towards extinction....each gender lived its own journey." In these events individual experiences were varied but in particular women had a different experience. The living condition in ghettos was horrible, many people died from starvation, neglect and illness since people living there were cut off from food rations, heat sources and medicines as it was Hitler's belief that Jews were parasites. There were large gas chambers in extermination camps like one in Auschwitz where people were gassed to death in large chambers.

There is no shortage of fiction on Holocaust experiences. We have Anne Franks, "Diary of a Young Girl", a memoir from eyes of a teenage girl. Many writers have penned down the atrocities of Nazi regime. We have works from Nobel Laureates like Herta Muller's "Hunger Angel", Imre Kertesz "Destiny". They deal with the survival theme, capacity of psyche to bear extreme trauma. How people can survive when subjugated to barbaric forces. We have nonfiction works as "The Holocaust In fiction" by Harry James Cargas, "Holocaust Literature by Lilian Kremer and Harold Blooms "Literature of Holocaust"

While women's experiences during holocaust were not entirely different from those of men, but it would be false and misleading to assume that they were same. In many instances a person's ordeal was shaped by his or her gender. A fundamental factor in their experience of holocaust not being identical is due to their biological difference. Not making my study gender specific but using gender as framework to acknowledge all possible consequences of all social organizations. To understand how societal hierarchy also affects the experience of trauma. The life of a Jewish woman was doubly jeopardized in comparison to other fellow prisoners, being vulnerable due to her biological difference, gender specific socialization patterns and biggest obligation of being a nurturer. By focusing on women the study will offer a more detailed and more nuanced understanding of what happened to Jews during holocaust. Women were subjected to persecution unique to their gender, they were subjected to rape, sterilisation experiments and forced abortions. Many women incarcerated in the concentration camps created "mutual assistance" groups which facilitated survival through sharing information, food and clothes. Women coped with hunger differently and had developed survival tactics different from men and coming back to their role as nurturer they provided mutual support to each other. So in studying the gender from perspective of woman enlightens us in different survival and resistance strategies. Being a woman she was able to create bonding and supporting groups and helping her fellow prisoners especially children to endure better.

We have many writers dealing with "women and Holocaust" such as Myrna Goldenberg, Lilian Kremer, Carol Rittner etc. These writers try to explore the effects of such hostile conditions on women's lives and psyche. Ilona Karmel's novel "An Estate of Memory" centres around four women who band together in Nazi labor camp. One of the women is pregnant and determined to give birth to child. The novel shows how the other three women help her to conceal her pregnancy and risking their own lives provide her with extra nutrition and

shoulder her extra share of physical labor. The writer highlights the capacity of a woman to resist and survive against such forces of atrocity and come up as ethical beings.

The attempt to write about holocaust is not only remembering and honoring the victims of holocaust. It stands as a warning of what can happen to a nation when its leaders are motivated by hate and blame of a specific group of people. The hatred based on their religious or ethnic divide. So what is important is to study the factors leading to ethnic cleansing. What is ironical in present political scenario across the globe is that the more we are advocating human rights and coming up with new theories in field of anthropology and thinking about world as a one country the more we are becoming intolerant towards human values and in this race of proving ones might we have left behind humanity. And that is the reason that since 20th century history has witnessed such genocides and mass killings like Armenian genocide, Cambodian killings, and killings in Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur and many more. Such incidents have put humanity to shame but one thing that again comes to mind is how long we can be mute spectators of such inhumane and inexorable behavior that challenges some fundamental notions of world as we know it today.

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