

## RESTORATIVE AND REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA AMONG JEWISH DIASPORA: A STUDY OF ELIE WIESEL'S SELECTED NOVELS

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### **Abstract:**

*Nostalgia is a feeling that indelibly marked the lives of all those helpless people who somehow survived exile, loss and persecution. Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* described it as a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed. She divided it mainly in two types- Restorative Nostalgia and Reflective Nostalgia. Restorative Nostalgia focuses on the desire to reconstruct the lost home and 'patch up the memory gaps.' It signifies a return to the original stasis, to the 'prelapsarian moment.' While Reflective Nostalgia is a sense of Longing and loss, "an imperfect process of remembrance", it also includes the elements of mourning and melancholia. Reflective Nostalgia, according to her, remains grounded in the domain of the unrecovered past, while Reconstructive Nostalgia is employed as a strategy to construct a sense of national revival. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and author of more than fifty books portrayed this feeling of longing for past in almost all his novels. His *Twilight*, *Legends of Our Time*, *The Town Beyond the Wall* and autobiography *All Rivers Run to the Sea* particularly described the loneliness, homesickness, nostalgia, un-fulfilled dreams and desires of Jewish Diaspora. Elie described these memories as an antidote for these forced immigrants because they bound them to their origins. Some of them want to go back to their homeland; they are examples of Restorative Nostalgia. Others yearn for their homeland but their desire to return to homeland emphasizes loss rather than restoration because they are aware of the fact that there is nothing left for them.*

**Key Words:** *Nostalgia, Restorative, Reflective, Diaspora, Melancholy.*

Nostalgia, as defined by *The New Oxford Dictionary* (1998) is a 'sentimental longing for the past.' This word was originally coined by Swiss Physician Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation in 1688. He studied it as 'a medical or neurological disease' spread among Swiss Mercenaries. Hofer, while searching for Physiological and Neuroanatomical explanations, stated that the mercenaries suffered from Nostalgia, "a cerebral disease of essentially demonic cause" (387). The symptoms included emotional liability ranging from despondency to bouts of weeping, anorexia, and suicide attempts. The cause of the disease, according to him, was "the quite continuous vibration of animal spirits through those fibers of the middle brain in which impressed traces of ideas of the Fatherland still cling" (384). In nineteenth and twentieth century, the definition of Nostalgia had shifted from brain to psychiatric disorder and symptoms included anxiety and sadness, weakness and loss of appetite, insomnia and fever (Havlena & Holak, 1991). It became a psychological illness similar to depression that could affect anyone who is separated from his homeland or is willing to return to his past. Now millions of people are away from the place of their birth, living in voluntary or involuntary exile- their stories are best narratives of nostalgia. They not only suffered from nostalgia but also challenged it.

Although the word Nostalgia was coined in seventeenth century but this concept is very old. Jeff Greenberg in the thirteenth chapter of his book *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, has given the example of Nostalgia from Homer's *Odyssey*. Homer in *Odyssey* portrayed the yearning of Odysseus or Ulysses for his homeland. Odysseus fought the Trojan war for ten years and spent the another ten years of his life on a die-hard mission. He did not catch the sight of his homeland for twenty years but

even then Ithaca was there in his mind. He confided to his mistress Calypso who offered to make him immortal:

Full well I acknowledge prudent Penelope cannot compare with your stature or beauty, for she is only a mortal, and you are immortal and ageless. Nevertheless it is she whom I daily desire and pine for. Therefore I long for my home and to see the day of returning (Homer *The Odyssey* (1921) Trans Book V 78-79).

This paper is an attempt to understand the concept of Nostalgia from the perspective of Diasporic Narratives particularly of Elie Wiesel. Svetlana Boym in her essay "Nostalgia and its Discontents" derived from her book *The Future of Nostalgia* described it as a longing for a homeland that no longer exists or never existed. In these terms, we can say that Nostalgia is actually a longing for a utopia. Janelle L. Wilson in *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* stated that Nostalgia and individual or collective identity are intricately related to each other. She explains:

In these Postmodern times, when so many threats and obstacles to constructing and maintaining a coherent and consistent self-abound- the acts of remembering, recalling and reminiscing, and the corollary emotional experience of nostalgia may facilitate the kind of coherence, consistency and sense of Identity that each of us desperately needs (08).

The word Nostalgia comes from two Greek roots *Nostos* meaning "return home" and *Algia* "longing." According to Svetlana Boym, it is both a sentiment of loss and displacement and also a romance with one's own fantasy. She made three crucial points about Nostalgia. First, Nostalgia is not "anti-modern"; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it. Nostalgia and progress are doubles and mirror images of one another. It is not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of time and space that makes the division into "local" and "universal." Second, Nostalgia seems to be a longing for a place but actually it is a yearning or burning desire for a different point of time. For example- time of our childhood. It is a kind of rebellion against the irreversibility of time. Third, she regarded Nostalgia not only as retrospective but also prospective because "the fantasies of past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future" ("Nostalgia and its Discontents" 08).

The "Chosen People" of God or Jews constantly live under diasporic conditions and as a result face deracination, oppression, legal disabilities, an endless struggle with issues of identity and an often painful adjustment to a host land whose hospitality was unreliable and ephemeral. Jewish diaspora resides in many countries like United States, France, Britain, Russia and many more. People living in a diasporic condition attempt to retain their heritage and ethnic identity by holding onto past memory, which is confined to their hearts. They often find themselves sandwiched between the memories of their past and their present condition. This longing for homeland is beautifully portrayed in the novels of Jewish American writer Elie Wiesel. In his novels, mostly autobiographical, Wiesel portrays the feeling of Nostalgia or homesickness among the diasporic people and as a result they are constantly haunted by the past memories and these memories alienated them from all others. Memory plays an all important role in his novels. He states in his novel *The Forgotten*, "For a Jew, nothing is more important than memory. He is bound to his origin by memory" (88). He used the motif of madness and muteness to present their condition. He called them unfortunate because they are condemned to live outside of time and their homeland breathes only in their memory. It's very difficult to run away from those memories because for them all roads led to the place of their dreams. That remained the only fixed point in this seething world. In *Legends of Our Times* he wrote, "I have never really left the place where I was born, where I learned to walk and to love: the whole universe is but an extension of that little town..." (09). Svetlana Boym called Nostalgia a curable disease, "dangerous but not lethal" ("Nostalgia" 11). That could be cured by "Leeches, warm hypnotic emulsions, opium or a trip to the alps" (11) but nothing compared to the return to the motherland. That was believed to be the best remedy for Nostalgia. The happiness of visiting the place of dreams and desires is beyond description. Elie Wiesel's *The Testament* beautifully exemplify this statement of her. The protagonist of

this novel expresses his feelings after reaching his hometown after so many years, with these lines, “I forgot my fatigue, my ailments, my disappointments, my illusions. I forgot everything; I walked and walked for hours and hours, until nightfall. . . . I felt the desire to rest there. Forever” (315).

She divided this feeling of longing for the past or Nostalgia in two parts- Restorative Nostalgia and Reflective Nostalgia. Restorative Nostalgia “stresses 'nostos' (home) and attempts a trans-historical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective Nostalgia “thrives on 'algia' (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming- wistfully, ironically, desperately” (“Nostalgia” 13). Restorative Nostalgia dwells on the notion of rebuilding the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. This type of nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia but rather as truth and tradition. It is at the core of recent national and religious revivals. It knows two main plots- the return to origins and the conspiracy. Reflective Nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones. It loves details, not symbols. The rhetoric of restorative nostalgia is not about “the past” but rather about universal values, family, nature, homeland, truth. The rhetoric of reflective nostalgia is about taking out of time and about grasping the fleeing present (13). Boym wrote in her essay:

Restoration signifies a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment. While restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one homeland with paranoic determination, reflective nostalgia fears return with the same passion. Instead of recreation of the lost home, reflective nostalgia can foster the creation of aesthetic individuality. (15)

Restorative Nostalgia includes the elements of mourning and melancholia. This type of nostalgic person wants to rehabilitate to his former place of living. Michael, the protagonist of novel *The Town Beyond the Wall* written by Elie Wiesel, used every fair or unfair mean to return to his hometown Szerencsevaros. He entered the town illegally and as a result he was sent to prison and put to many torturous punishments. To justify his act, he recounted:

All I've done is for Szerencsevaros. I thought it might be anywhere except where geography said it was. I told myself that the city too had been deported, transplanted, to Germany or to heaven. Now I'd like . . . to see if it exists, if it's still what it was. (119)

This type of nostalgia is dangerous also because it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. Boym wrote, “In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill” (“Nostalgia” 10). This type of nostalgia can breed monsters. They are particularly attractive to groups who feel victimized by change in the modern world. The most extreme example of restorative nostalgia can be seen in the Hitler's policy towards Jews. He thought that Germany could only become prosperous through the removal of Jews because he held them responsible for Germany's defeat in the World War I and also for the collapse of the monarchy. He regarded his action of final solution necessary for the well-being of Germany. The creation of Jerusalem for diasporic Jews is also a result of restorative nostalgia because it provides a home to them. Nostalgia is otherwise a positive word because it bounds us to our roots or origins but restorative nostalgia has given it a negative form. Restorative Nostalgia gave birth to anger and disgust and these feelings resulted in destruction only. Nostalgics of this type frequently long for “good old days,” forgetting everything about the present.

Reflective Nostalgia on the other hand is more flexible and does not concern with the re-establishment of stasis. Its focus is not on the recovery of what is lost but on the meditation of history and the passage of time. It does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home. Boym wrote:

This type of Nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. Nostalgics of the second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has just been renovated and gratified beyond recognition (“Nostalgia” 16).

Nostalgics of this type live in reality and never mixed their dreamy visions with their present condition. They do wanted to visit the place of their childhood or that of their past but only to have a glimpse of that place as Elie Wrote in *Legends of Our Times*, “They had a burning desire to go there. For a week, an hour, a

minute- Just long enough for a single look. To see it one last time and then to depart, never to see it again” (111). Their motive is not the reconstruction of home in their homelands but only to visit that place just to cherish those memories. His autobiography *All Rivers Run to the Sea* also describes the longing of a diasporic person for his homeland. These lines depict his pathetic condition:

The town haunted me, I saw it everywhere, always the same as it had been. It invaded my dreams, it came between me and the world, between me and other people, between me and myself. By trying to free myself from it, I was becoming its prisoner (112).

He wanted to go to his hometown and he described his visit in his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall*. He wrote, “I entered the town as one enters a dream: gliding forward noiselessly, without resistance, accepting in advance the best and the worst” (114). “The best” refers to his sense of fulfillment because finally, after twenty years, he visited the place of his dreams and he could feel all memories associated with that place. “The worst” refers to the bitter truth that nothing remained the same over there. He met some of his neighbors, who earlier visited his place daily. They refused to recognize him. Elie wrote, “They showed neither pleasure nor disappointment: my return was of no consequence to them” (122). This realization that everything is changed now put this in the category of reflective nostalgia that is fully aware of the irrevocability of past. For it homecoming does not signify a recovery of identity and does not make an end of the journey in the virtual space of imagination. This type of nostalgic could be homesick and sick of home, at once. Ulysses is also an example of this type. He returned home after several years only to look back at his journey not to build his home at that place for ever. Even Elie was given a choice to go back to his home but he refused to go back. He was asked if he is not curious to go back and see the place where he was born, where he spent his childhood? But he refused because for him that place no longer existed that remained just an imagination for him. He knew that nothing remained the same there. He preferred to exile himself to France and began to wander all over the world. To Israel, to America and to the far east. He was not sure “whether it was in order to get away from sighet (the place of his birth) or to find it again.” (*Legends* 112)

Not only Elie Wiesel, there are also writers like Philip Roth and Hannah Ardent who wrote for the diasporic people. In her essay “We Refugees” written in 1943, Hannah Ardent describes her experiences as a refugee and stateless person, the experiences of the diaspora, their problems of assimilation, identity and forced identity and their continuous longing for their past. She describes in detail what it means to be diaspora or wanderer and forced to leave one's home. She said:

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings.... (110)

Philip Roth, a prolific Jewish-American writer also tackles these kind of issues in his novels like *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Counter life*. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Portnoy relates to his psychiatrist, “Those centuries and centuries of homelessness had produced just such disagreeable men as myself- frightened, defensive, self- deprecating, unmanned and corrupted by life in the entire world” (265).

So the main difference between Reflective and Restorative Nostalgia, as described by Boym is that- 'Algia' or 'longing' (Reflective Nostalgia) is what we share and 'Nostos' or 'the return to homeland' (Restorative Nostalgia) is what divides us. They both use the same triggers of memory and symbols but tell different stories about it. Svetlana Boym described the Restorative Nostalgia as one that gravitates toward collective pictorial symbols and oral culture. While Reflective Nostalgia is more oriented towards an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs yet perpetually defers homecoming itself. In her own words:

If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered

fragments of memory and temporalizes space. Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment, or critical reflection. ("Nostalgia" 15)

In the end, only solution or antidote for nostalgia as given by Svetlana boym also, is to leave dreams alone or to let them be 'no more and no less than dreams.' because it can be destructive as well as creative. It depends on our own self how we take the responsibility of our nostalgia. It can be a poison or a cure. The dreams of imagined homeland should not come to life. We must learn to draw a fine line between our past and present self in order to be happy.

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