

THE DOUBLE BIND OF MEMORY IN SELECT HOLOCAUST LIFE WRITINGS

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Abstract:

The issue of memory is closely related to survival and avowal of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel in one of his interviews had said, "Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future." This paper focuses on the personal memory of Holocaust victims and survivors and the way memory functions in concentration camp inmates as they encountered the most inhuman and unthinkable of brutalities and the conflicting way it functions in survivors who are plagued by trauma and survivor guilt. For the concentration camp inmate, memory of the pre-war life seems to make suffering bearable and serves as a support system and succour whereas for the survivor, the faculty of memory that had been their only companion, evolves into traumatic Holocaust memory that they constantly encounter and negotiate in an effort to lead a normal life. This will be discussed based on the writings of Etty Hillesum, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and Charlotte Delbo.

Keywords: Holocaust, Memory, Trauma, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi.

Memory, though in the neurological and physiological levels, is a set of encoded connections in the brain, has epistemologically emerged not merely as a supplementary to history but an alternative way of narrating and recalling the past. While through its impersonality and objectivity, history creates a past that nobody can remember or relate to, memory embodied in verified testimonies, with its personal interpretation and transmission of experience, serve as the crucible from which rich-textured past emerge. The word "memory" has its origin in the Anglo-Norman *memorie* which is derived from the Latin word *memoria* meaning "remembering", "mindful" or "anxious". In Greek mythology, the Goddess of Memory- Mnemosyne, was revered as the mother of the Muses. The ancient idea of memory was based on the concept of mimesis according to which Imagination and Memory are reverse sides of "imitating Nature". Towards the end of the twentieth century, discourse on memory emerged as an urgent topic of debate in humanities and the idea of memory came to be closely allied with autobiographical soul-searching. The Holocaust, the most heinous crime of history, remains the archetypal and primary topic in memory studies. Israeli historian Saul Friedlander wondered if history could ever do justice to the existential meaning the Holocaust held for its victims as reckoning with these traumatic recollections and demanded a new approach which can be provided only through testimonies.

Holocaust memory studies is a vibrant area of interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry in the social sciences and humanities. Holocaust Life-writing that subsumes autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries and journals have been inseparably intertwined with the theme of Memory. There are various possible schematisations and perspectives of memory such as, Richard Rubenstein's valorisation of memory as an indicator of departing from the traditional paradigm, Paul Ricœur's memory as a mould of history, Halbwach's collective memory, Marianne Hirsch's concept of Post Memory and Emil Fackenheim's approach of keeping memory alive as an act of restoring the world that is adrift and in dissolution.

This paper focuses on the personal memory of Holocaust victims and survivors and the double bind, memory has on concentration camp inmates as they encountered the most inhuman and unthinkable of brutalities and on survivors after the liberation. For the concentration camp inmate, memory seems to

have made suffering possible and have served as a support system and succour whereas for the survivor the same memory that had been their only companion, evolves into traumatic memory that constantly haunts them and hinders their effort to lead a normal life.

For the core camp inmates, memory has two purposes: (1) In their deplorably dehumanised state, memory keeps them reminded of their true identity and self. (2) Memory allows life before the camp, patch through the walls of their mind, disrupting recent, horrific memories of the camp. Primo Levi, in his *If This is a Man*, talks of memory as, “the comrade of all my peaceful moments” (169). The camp inmates are left with nothing but their survival instinct and memory. Memory is the only possible escape from the state of being a people from whom everything has been taken away and the past is all that remained. Primo Levi recounts, “The moment of entry into the camp was the starting point of a different sequence of thought, those near and sharp, continually confirmed by present experience, like wound re-opened every day” (138). Though they constantly dream of freedom and liberation, the prisoners are left with only a bleak and flickering hope of the future and the past that could always be retrieved under the sign of nostalgia.

In extermination camps, death and extermination of the body only come as the last step, whereas the extermination of identity happens the moment the prisoner steps into the camp. Primo Levi says, “Nothing belong to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair... They will take away even our names” (23) In a place where there is no “why?”, where humans are reduced to “hollow men” their only possession they cling on to for sanity and identity is memory. Memory served as their antidote against the force of dehumanisation and effort to regain and retain their humanness.

Holocaust survivor and French writer, Charlotte Delbo in her book, *The Measure of our Days* narrates the experience shared by her fellow inmate, Mado:

Over there we had our entire past, all our memories, even memories from long ago passed on by our parents. We armed ourselves with this past for protection, erecting it between horror and us in order to stay whole, keep our true selves, our being. We kept on dipping into our past, our childhood, into whatever formed our personality, our character, tastes, ideas, so we might recognize ourselves, preserve something of what we were, not letting this situation dent us, annihilate us... Each of us recounted her life thousands and thousands of times, resurrecting her childhood, the time of freedom and happiness... Our past was our lifeline and reassurance. (258)

Charlotte Delbo in the vignette titled “The Misanthrope” in her book, *Useless Knowledge* talks about how afraid she was of losing her memory. She recounts her efforts to keep her faculty of memory sharp. She tells us about the exercises she invented to put her memory to work; her efforts to memorise all the telephone numbers she used to know and recall the names of all the metro stations along a line and names of the shops between the Athenee theatre and the Havre-Caumartin metro station. With infinite efforts, she manages to recall fifty-seven poems, even during the gruesome roll calls. Delbo narrates how she traded a copy of the book *Le Misanthrope* for a ration of bread and eagerly memorised the whole book. In the camp, losing memory, for Charlotte Delbo, is something even more dreadful than starvation. She says, “I always feared losing my memory. To lose one's memory is to lose oneself, to no longer be oneself” (188).

Threatened by the horror of going to concentration camp, Etty Hillesum, a Jewish Holocaust victim, in her diary mentions packing her memories like a suitcase and taking them to concentration camp. (An Interrupted Life 131). She proudly proclaims, “Out there, I shall simply have to carry everything inside me (181) Hillesum believes that as long as she could take her memories she could be at home anywhere in the world (207). In Westerbork Transit Camp, where she was waiting for her deportation, she declared, “I can live here as well as I do just *because* I remember everything from “before” (it is not really a “before” for me), and I go on living (271).

When the much-dreamed of liberation finally arrived the survivors found that they could hardly be

liberated from their traumatic and painful memories of the camps. Trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth in her book, *Unclaimed Experience* explains how the Greek word “trauma” meant “wound” originally referring to an injury inflicted on the body and how later centred on Freud's text, is understood as a wound inflicted on the mind or psyche. (3) Traumatic experiences are not healable like the wound of the body but a collapse in the mind's experience of time, self and the world that negates any sense of purpose or meaning in life. Most of the survivors become victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as overwhelming events of the past repeatedly present themselves in intrusive images and thoughts becoming the central characteristics of the survivor experience of our time. The inexpressible nature of the terror they had undergone makes the unable to express in words and this is made worse by the unwillingness of the world to listen to their stories, forcing the survivors into “painful silence burdened with memories”.

About the liberation Primo Levi says, “So for us even the hour of liberty rang out grave and muffled, and filled our souls with joy and yet with a painful sense of prudency, so that we should have liked to wash our consciences and our memories clean from the foulness that lay upon them” (Truce 218) Immediately after the liberation, memories appear tainted and foul to the survivor and when he talks of his life in Italy after leaving the camp Primo Levi says, “We felt the weight of the centuries on our shoulders, we felt oppressed by a year of ferocious memories; we felt emptied and defenceless” (219). He recollects vividly the full horror of nightmares that never ceased haunting him. Reckoning with these unhappy memories demanded a new approach. The inquiry undertaken by historians who were concerned that the worst atrocities might be glossed over and forgotten revealed the fact that some memories cannot be easily tamed by history and the investigations reiterated Freud's thesis about the necessity of “working through” repressed memory to uncover harsh and painful truths about crimes against humanity (Rosenfield).

Psychologists have found that a number of temporal paradoxes occur in patients with PTSD. Though recall or willed access to traumatic memory cannot be controlled, the survivors re-experience, aspects of trauma in the form of intrusive thoughts, flashback or nightmares. Modern neuro-biologists claim that the “engraving” or “etching into the brain” of an event of trauma may be connected with its omission of normal encoding in memory. Because of its horror and unexpectedness, the traumatic event has never been fully integrated into comprehension and hence it becomes impossible for the event to become matter of intelligence and it recurrently returns in its exactness at a later time. Caruth's book *Unclaimed Experience*, that has become an important reference point in cultural trauma theory suggests that because trauma is registered but never quite assimilated to experience or language, the truth cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (91).

In Charlotte Delbo's book *Measure of Days*, her friend Mado laments saying, “Today my memories, my past are over there. When I project my thought backwards they never overstep these bounds... I'm not alive... I'm imprisoned in memories and repetitions” (259-261). The survivors find themselves constantly haunted by the memory of their fellow inmates they had lost in the concentration camp and the memory fills them with survivor guilt. Mado recounts her experience of becoming a mother- she desired to start life anew and she dreamed of having a baby. Even as she is suffused with joy seeing her newborn son, she says:

My room was invaded by the ghosts of my companions. The ghost of Mounette was saying, “Mounette died without knowing this joy”. Jackie's ghost stretched out useless hands. These were the ghosts of all the young girls, all the young women who died without knowing what it meant to be suffused by this joy. The silky water of my joy changed to sticky mud, sooty snow, fetid marshes. I saw again this woman- you remember this peasant woman, lying in the snow, dead, with her dead newborn frozen between her thighs... How can one be alive amid these masses of dead women? (262)

These painful memories of events and people do not fade away as other ordinary memory does but traumatic memory remains etched in their mind, as persistent as the number tattooed in their skin.

Holocaust child survivor and psychoanalyst Dori Laub has stated that the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling and survivors who do not tell their stories become victims of distorted memory that invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life (Trauma: Explorations in Memory 64). Mado says, "Time does not pass over me, over us. It doesn't erase anything, doesn't undo it. I'm not alive. I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it" (267). Challenging Adorno's famous dictum that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz, Delbo expresses her trauma through poetry and in one of her poems she writes,

As far as I'm concerned
I'm still there
dying there
a little more each day
dying over again
the death of those who died. (Useless Knowledge 224)

Delbo speaks of her two selves- Auschwitz self and Post-Auschwitz self and employs the metaphor of snake shedding its skin. "Auschwitz is so deeply etched in my memory... Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. Unlike the snake's skin the skin of memory does not renew itself... (Days and Memory 2). She finds a distinction between the two operations of memory as "*memoire ordinaire* or Common Memory"- the memory that urges her to regard the Auschwitz ordeal as a part of a chronology and "*Memoire profonde* or Deep Memory- the memory that considers the Auschwitz past as a past that never can pass. Endorsing these views Holocaust memory scholar, Lawrence Langer speaks of the "ruins of memory" and affirms that "deep memory", which is the forcefully repressed and traumatised memory of the victims cannot be converted to "common memory" that belongs to the pre- and post-camp life. In his views, equally notable is the double structure of the Holocaust memory that is associated with a double structure of time that suggests a split between "chronological time" and "durational time".

Survivor and writer Elie Wiesel in his *Dawn* talks of survivors as the "living-dead". Though in outward appearance they may look normal, he says, "Anyone who has seen what they have seen cannot be like the others, cannot laugh, love, pray, bargain, suffer, have fun, or forget" (296). Haunted by traumatic memories and hounded by survivor guilt they live an amputated and crippled life without the will to live. He confesses, "We feel ashamed and guilty to be alive, to eat as much bread as we want, to wear good, warm socks in the winter" (325). This is a nightmare that follows survivors throughout their entire life, sometimes pushing them over even to suicide as in the case of Levi, Jean Amery, Borowski and many others who fell victims to the Holocaust only years after. The experience of genocide and the conditions following the Holocaust is thus precariously found in the space between the double bind of memory and survival making it a reality that is concerned with the continuous challenge that the Holocaust addresses to the world.

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