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Silence Encourages the Tormentor and never the Tormented: A Study of Elie Wiesel's *Night*

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Abstract:

With the close reading of Elie Wiesel's *Night* based on the personal experience of the author himself, this paper tends to put focus on the dynamics of the World War 2 and how the Jews were treated in the most inhuman way and were forced to put to death. The paper talks about Holocaust and because of its similarity with the partition of 1947 of India. It further discusses the human psyche and how it has not learnt a bit from the previous occurred wars and violence that have occurred either in the name of religion, or politics or social differences.

Keywords: Communal Violence, Mass Genocide of Jews, Holocaust, World War 2, War, Memoir of Elie Wiesel, Partition of 1947.

The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it. (Albert Einstein)

Cruel and cold-blooded communal violence has been witnessed from time to time by the people all over the world for one reason or the other and at times eventually for no reason at all, i.e., just for the sake of fulfilling one's insatiability for money, wealth, or lust to attain prosperity and power which ultimately turns the man into a beast. Human being, since time immemorial, is most of the time engaged in either destroying the other person or at least in inflicting pain in one way or the other, for which the person possibly thinks will bring peace and happiness to his life. But little does the person know that with such thoughts and actions, the peace that he attains is temporary and can never give the person a permanent gratification.

Having a strong dilemma in mind based on the questions as to what a person actually gets by indulging himself into such hard-hitting violence and why doesn't God, who is said to be the creator of the world, doesn't intervene in such actions of the human; the author has penned down this marvellous piece of work. *Night*, written by Elie Wiesel, refers to one such kind of violence that is termed as holocaust (1944-45) and is a description of author's personal traumatic experience when the Nazis perpetrated the cruellest form of inhumanity on the Jews. The narration of the story in the novel has been cast through a fictional character named, Eliezer, who is the author himself. The author through his own personal experience recounts the real incidents that he faced and suffered during those times, which were actually triggered by the then President Adolf Hitler.

The mass genocide that occurred during that time had a drastic impact on the people living then and had left a great scar in the minds of the survivors, who now think to make the coming generation aware of what actually happened in the past and what their ancestors had gone through. Their main motive to make the people aware is not just to scare them of the past but to strengthen them so that such events do not occur in future again; and if for any chance such events resurface again into the society then the future generation should be able to cope up with the harsh scenarios and should try their level best in eradicating them from the root.

The main intention of the author behind scripting this novel (which we may call as his autobiography) after he remained in his self-imposed hibernation for about ten years, was to make the world aware of the darkest period in the lives of Jews of which he was also a part. He wanted the world to wake up and be aware of “the nature of madness, the immense, terrifying madness that had erupted in history and in the conscience of mankind” (Preface – vii) and could be able to prevent its recurrence in the future.

The famous personality Wallace Shawn said:

“I don't know about you, but I only have one life, and I don't want to spend it in a sewer of injustice.”

Both the author and Wallace Shawn had almost the same intention of waking up the world from its silence towards the wrongs that are happening all around and are being tolerated with patience. Both of them want that the coming future generation should be alert and aware about what all wrong that is happening around the world and hence they should speak up or take action against all the odds. But unfortunately, it is a common human tendency to neglect what is going around in the world. People usually remain silent towards the destruction for the reason of indifference to the violence or for the fear of the mighty action by the influential politicians.

Night, the author's memoir describes his turmoil about the intensity of atrocities and cruelty of the humans over humans that compelled the sufferers to lose their faith in God. In addition it shattered their hope for a better living and destroyed their mutual bonds so much so that not only the Nazis were cruel towards the Jews but the Jews too turned cruel towards their own people. There are scenes in the novel that show people killing their own relatives in order to survive. Rabbi Eliahu, a character in the novel, was left alone by his son when all the Jews were marching from the Buna camp to Buchenwald camp.

But then I remembered something else: his son had seen him losing ground, sliding back to the rear column. He had seen him. And he had continued to run in front, letting the distance between them become greater. (Wiesel 91)

All through the novel the characters including the author himself suffer from the dilemma that makes them to wonder, “if God exists.” This diminishing faith in the very existence of God could be further experienced from the scenes where the babies were thrown into the flames, women and small girls including the mother and sister of the author getting pushed into the gas

chambers. The little *Pipel's* hanging to death in full public view of thousands on lookers irretrievably explodes their faith in God and stony silence remains visible even then.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

'For God's sake, where is God?'

And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

'Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows....' (Wiesel 65)

According to Ellen Fine, the core recurring theme that the novel depicts is: - the death of God, humanity, innocence, and disbanding of the self.

Inhumanity is the keynote of stupidity in power. (Alexander Berkman)

Three characters in the novel, Moishe the Beadle, Moishe Chaim Berkowitz and Madame Schachter, gave hints in their own ways so as to protect the Jews from suffering that was about to happen in their cities. But none of them had paid any attention. The deliberate neglect reflects hope for some positivity.

The news spread through Sighet like wildfire. Soon that was all people talked about. But not for long. Optimism soon revived: The Germans will not come this far. They will stay at Budapest. For strategic reasons, for political reasons.....

In less than three days, German Army vehicles made their appearance on our streets. (Wiesel 9)

If the dissenting voices had been raised in majority, the kind of violence that the Jews suffered at that time could have been reduced to some degree if not stopped completely.

The violence of the holocaust was so relentless that it inspired innumerable movies one of which is "The Pianist", directed by Roman Polanski, which is based on the plight of the tormented individuals, the ones who suffered violence in its brutal form as depicted in 'Night'. In distress, even if someone musters the courage to raise the voice against the torture, he or she would be eliminated by the ones' against whom the voice is raised. It follows that the man cannot even express his grief because each word of anguish and pain is punished with more aggravated form of torture.

'The Pianist' shows a man snatching a bowl of pudding from the hands of a lady and their struggling moves causing it to spill on the road but the hunger of the man makes him eat the same. The scene thus brings another aspect of the brutal violence to the forefront, where a man's hunger is so intense that he doesn't even care whether the food he is eating is clean, healthy or not; what matters to him is only food which can satisfy his hunger.

There have been a lot many instances in the novel which clearly depict that how atrocious the Nazis have been towards the Jews in torturing them. People were tortured to such an extent that either they ate the food thrown on the roads or if they were able to control their hunger, they

stored it for their future. There were times when people in order to save their own lives and fill their own stomachs had to exchange their valuables in return to get something beneficial for themselves.

Most importantly the father-son relationship between Eliezer and his father plays a crucial role in defining the changing character of Eliezer. All through the novel both the father and son lived for each other, till it became difficult for the father to survive anymore and to whom Eliezer was unable to help. During his last breaths, he kept on calling his son to which his son didn't pay any heed and hence the father died being unheard by his son. His last wish which he could have told to his son remained a secret and hence remained concealed in the heart of the father.

My father was pleading:

“My son, water.....I'm burning up.....my insides....”

“Silence over there!” barked the officer.

“Eliezer,” continued my father, “water...”

The officer came closer and shouted to him to be silent. But my father did not hear. He continued to call me. The officer wielded his club and dealt him a violent blow to the head.

I didn't move. I was afraid, my body was afraid of another blow this time to my head.

My father groaned once more, I heard:

“Eliezer.....” (Wiesel 111)

The intensity of the above quoted atrocities clearly depict as to how a man to satisfy his anger and frustration can become a brutal animal and hence act inhumanely towards other menfolk. The kind of atrocities that the sufferers had gone through during these concentration camps have not only made their lives difficult to live but also made even the readers or the listeners hard to believe as to how a man can torture someone in such an outrageous manner.

It is not only the holocaust that occurred in the past as a form of mass violence. Such violence have been faced by the world since time immemorial and it is strange to know that even after suffering so much from the past violence, human beings do not seem to learn from the past. Even after holocaust, there have been many more wars and violence that have occurred with equal or more belligerences that left deep scars in the memory of human beings.

The violence of Indo-Pak partition of 1947 is one such example that is engraved in the memories of Hindus and Muslims. Our forefathers too have become victim of this violation that culminated as a sequel to the partition. Both for India and Pakistan it was one of the most horrifying periods the people of these countries have ever faced. Millions of people were either killed or were forcibly rendered homeless as they fled from their homes in order to get to the relief camps erected for the refugees.

The people who suffered a lot during this period as the cost for attaining independence were the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The main reason behind this violence was that the leaders of the respective countries wanted to have a single religion country, just like the Nazis wanted a state where there were no Jews. Where holocaust focused on the elimination of one complete race, the 1947 partition war focused on the elimination of one complete religion.

The trains were introduced to transfer the Muslims to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs to India and on the way many people on either of the trains were being killed by the opposite community. Women and children were the brutalized victims of this violence. It was not that they were killed only by the opposite community but by their own near and dear ones so that the other community would not get a chance to insult or outrage their dignity and modesty.

Here another aspect of war comes to the forefront, which clearly portrays that during wars it is the women and children who suffer the most. Women and children being the most vulnerable become the easiest target for the victimisers. For victimisers to degrade the dignity or honour of other community they choose women for doing it, as once the dignity of a woman is degraded it is said that the pride of the whole clan or community also gets tainted through her. And hence because of women becoming the easy target, they get raped, abducted and in the end murdered by the victimisers.

The famous author Napoleon once said:

The world suffers a lot, not because of the violence of bad people, but because of the silence of good people!

Another such example which is of similar nature is the 1984 riots. During these riots also the kind of trauma and the torture that one community experienced was extremely horrifying. These riots occurred after the assassination of the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Amitav Ghosh in his short story titled, *The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi*, has portrayed this violence. The brutality with which the Sikhs were hounded and massacred by the rioters was executed in such high proportions that they were dragged from their houses and business establishments and wherever they could be found and then mercilessly killed. Incidents of loot and arson were exponentially high and were at their peak.

Thus if we look at the past and ascertain the root cause of previously occurred wars, an important conclusion that our discovery would deduce is that eventually all wars were prompted out of some opportunistic motives of the politicians that they sought to fulfil by the blood of common people. And the irony is that even after knowing such a horrifying past, the man remains ignorant and silent and gets influenced and carried away by the superfluous talks of the politicians and in the end blames God for allowing such kind of violence happening all around the world.

God remains silent so that men and women may speak, protest and struggle. God remains silent so that people may really become people. When God is silent and

men and women cry, God cries in solidarity with them but doesn't intervene. God waits for the shouts of protest. (Elsa Tamez)

This ignorant attitude of the world towards the people who have been suffering at some other corner of the world has encouraged the victimisers to torture the victims more intensely. It seems that the world from such horrifying experiences of the past has not learned even an iota of a lesson to save humanity, because today also if we look around in the world we will see that wars are still going on, they have not at all ended.

Wiesel says in his Nobel peace prize acceptance speech “how naive we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” (118)

Thus to stop such riotous acts of violence, a strongly framed law with equally strong socio-political performance free from bias and influence, needs to be there that treats people equally regardless of caste, creed, sex, religion and any other condition. Living the life in a dignified, free and fair manner is a fundamental right of each citizen that needs to be protected through the intervention of the Government at all levels.

Some lines from author's speech that seem to be completely apt:

One person of integrity can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs. (Wiesel 120)

It should be hence made sure that if we will not speak up for the agony and suffering of others; a day will come when no one will be left to speak up in our helpless conditions. The words of Pastor Martin Niemöller clearly depict the helplessness and regret; that if he had spoken at the very beginning, may be things would have been a little different, if not completely:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me. (Holocaust)

It therefore very lucidly guides us by saying that the world faces a lot of challenges today and it is easy to turn a blind eye to some of these things and hope that they will either go away or miraculously get sorted. So many of us go through our lives, remain silent about what matters to the world and other people. It is as if we are on auto-pilot, day after day. We should be aware that the opportunity once lost is lost in its entirety since the time never comes back.

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