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Hopes and Horizons: Revisiting the Issues of Human Rights in Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*

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Abstract:

The issue of Human Rights is mired in multiple debates concerning the legitimacy of its enforcement by nation states across the globe. This paper is an attempt to disengage the discourse of Human Rights from legal-juridical framework and analyze it from the humanistic, psychoanalytical perspective thereby presenting a case for its relocation within the precincts of universal human dignity. The paper focuses on Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, to validate Human Rights as the rights which come naturally as an inherent part of human legacy.

Keywords: Human Rights, Human Dignity, Holocaust, Logo therapy, Noo-Dynamics

The multidisciplinary interventions in the discourse of Human Rights from humanities and social sciences opens up a rich influx of introspection, based on exchanges between political, legal, and ethical dimensions of the same. In his influential book tracing the genesis of Human Rights in history, Samuel Moyn in *The Last Utopia* (2010) discusses the view of high profile observer, Michael Igantieff: "In the era of 1990s, an era of ethnic cleansing in southeastern Europe and beyond, during which human rights took on literally millennial appeal in the public discourse of the west, it became common to assume that, ever since their birth in the post holocaust wisdom, human rights embedded themselves slowly but steadily in humane consciousness in what amounted to a revolution of moral concern"(6). However Moyn steadily demolishes this argument, in favor of a more ancient lineage for human rights discourse beginning from Plato onwards. According to him "The best general explanations for the origin of this social movement and common discourse around rights remains the collapse of other, prior utopias, both state based and internationalists"(8).

My paper disengages from the polemics of evolution of Human Rights and interrogates instead the efficacy of Human rights as just another Universalist approach which translates into minimal legal consequence, and thereby posits the need to revisit the pristine idea of Human Rights, which existed in its nascent state in the human psyche, undifferentiated from the notion of Human dignity. On a revisionary journey to the cataclysmic historical event of Holocaust through the autobiographical works of two survivor-authors, in effort to salvage the concept of

Human Rights from the deluge of contemporary philosophical disputes, the paper takes into account the existence of modern Nation-State as a distinct political apparatus, with supreme jurisdiction over demarcated territorial area, and backed by acclaim to a monopoly of coercive power, enjoying legitimacy as a result of common shared emotional and cultural connect of its citizens while admitting the occasional hijacking of the Human Rights debate by different Nation-States at different point of time in history to score a point in the crusade of justice against their opponents. It also acknowledges the transformation of the old world order, and the current dynamics of a world more interconnected and interdependent than ever before, due to the phenomenon now widely recognized as Globalization. The process of widening, deepening and the speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness, in all aspects of contemporary life has expedited the permeability between hitherto rigid boundaries, yet the proponents and observers of globalization like, David Held and Anthony McGrew, in their book, *Global Transformations* (1999) sound a note of caution when they assert that "Globalization as we have stressed on many occasions, is by no means merely a homogenizing force" (441).

The ethical need for Human Rights is all most uncontested; however the insurmountable predicament seems to be the implementation of Human Rights legislation. The seeming universality of their ethical intuitiveness—the rights fought for and through civil liberties movements and encoded in such treaties as Declaration of Human Rights and Geneva Conventions--- strike crudely against their judicial enforcement to particular, different cultural and state context. The Muslim feminist scholar Lisa Hajjar in her penetrating study, *Domestic Violence and Shari'a* also points to this dichotomy when she links Gender violence with Human Rights violation, and in course of which, one of the major hurdle to be faced is the State centered nature of Human Rights, which severely circumscribes the efficacy of its implementation. . There are always pockets of cultural resistance to any form of universalization. Critics and opponents argue that international legal standards contravene local customs and cultures and religious belief and practices. Resistance to applicability of international law cannot be understood merely as a regressive reaction to change. It must be analyzed as a relational response to the historic conditions and globalization. The formation and expansion of the ambit of human rights is one manifestation of the globalization of distinctly modern legal norms and political relations. However the internationalization of a common set of rights of all human beings has provoked a great deal of anxiety about cultural homogenization, especially in the societies of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The advocates of cultural purity have time and again perceived human rights as western construct and its legitimacy in non-western society as contestable. The efforts undertaken to confirm or mould local laws and to transform local political relations to accommodate international law is widely construed as a manifestation of enduring western hegemony, a continuation of old power dynamics in which there is a one way flux of norms and values articulated and propagated, that is from the west to the non-west.

The quagmire of coterminous yet confrontational ideologies of Human Rights has led to an impasse difficult to negotiate. My paper uses the theory and the psychoanalytical insights of Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, in his philosophical and therapeutic work, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959) to substantiate and validate an alternative perspective, simultaneously endorsed by another survivor-author Elie Wiesel in his autobiographical book *Night* (1958). Both the works are an austere reflection on the gross violation of human rights, and the devastating effects on innocence. However, beyond the isolation, alienation and soul destroying loneliness, documented in them, the inherent message, affirms the view that Man's search for meaning and the dignity associated with life, comes from an inward soul searching introspection, and that meaning is unique and specific in its essence, which can be fulfilled by Man alone. Tapping into the vast resources of mind and rich inner life, these Holocaust survivor-authors posit the view that deep inside the mind and spirit of human beings lies the conviction that Human Rights are the rights that comes naturally to one born as human, they are inalienable and inherent part of Man's human legacy.

Both writers are familiar with struggle for existence and the daily ordeals in the Nazi concentration camps. While Victor Frankl, an Austrian Neurologist, Psychiatrist is considered as one of the key figures of Existential therapy, the founder of Logotherapy, and a prominent source of inspiration for Humanistic Psychologists. Elie Wiesel is a Romanian born, Jewish American, Professor, and a Noble Laureate, whose Noble citation hails him as, "a messenger to mankind—not with message of hate and revenge, but with one of brotherhood and atonement." According to some survivors like Primo Levi, the Holocaust proved that morality is negotiable in extreme circumstances. Traditional morality ceased to exist inside the barbed fences of the camps, and as prisoners were constantly dehumanized, they adapted animalistic behavior in self-defense. The normative moral world lost its markers inside the fences. To survive in Auschwitz, according to Primo Levi required the purging of one's self-respect and human dignity. The complete annihilation of dignity, respect and the subsequent loss of meaning in life, resurfaced latter in some victim-survivors, as loss of faith in normal life. Wiesel records in his memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea*: "For Primo Levi the problem of faith after Auschwitz was posed in stark terms: Either God is God, and therefore all-powerful and hence guilty of letting the murderers do as they pleased, or his power is limited in which case he is not God" (83). The Non-Meaning or the loss of meaning hypothesis was also invoked by the critic Hannah Arendt though in different context, in her controversial report republished as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, opined that the executioner or criminal is defined by his passivity, by his indifference to what he does. He merely carries out the orders he has been given, he is in no sense a subject, and is as far removed as possible from any logic of subjectification. He is no more than an agent. The chilling similarity in the pattern of collapse of the moral worlds of the victim and the perpetrator posits the loss of meaning and dignity central to the crisis of dehumanization in both cases.

A philosopher of the enlightenment era, Immanuel Kant, held the view that certain things could not be assigned value per se, so these things could be said to have dignity. Kant started from the conviction that people were aware that they were subject to moral laws, and knew that they sometimes have to decide, what they are going to do and then do it. Kant's theory conceptualized the existence of human agent faced with a decision bringing his will to bear on the world freely. It is the decision to exercise this free will in service of the countless dead Jews that Elie Wiesel wrote *Night*. In the preface to the book, he states his intention to write, to bear witness to the sufferings of the millions and continue the legacy: "However having survived, I needed to give some meaning to my survival. Was it to protect that meaning that I set to paper an experience in which nothing made sense?"(vii). The quest for meaning in a life devoid of essential dignity travels the same terrain in Victor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*: "The third Viennese school of Psychotherapy focuses on the meaning of human existence, as well as man's search for such a meaning. According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. Why I speak of a 'Will to Meaning,' in contrast to the pleasure principle, on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the 'Will to Power,' on which Adlerian psychology, using the term 'Striving for superiority,' is focused. Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in life and not a secondary rationalization of instinctual drives" (104).

What constituted meaning precisely, in the imponderably monstrous scenarios depicted in *Night*? Critic Robert Alter compares Wiesel to Dante, the visionary author who traverses hell in his *Inferno*. The will to meaning could be glimpsed in the deportees of Sighet, huddle close in a miserable ghetto, awaiting their transportation in wretched cattle cars to their final destinations, the concentration camps: "We settled in.(what a word) I went looking for woods, my sisters lit a fire. Despite fatigue, my mother began to prepare a meal. We cannot give up, we cannot give up, she kept repeating" (20). Gordon W. Allport, in the preface to Frankl's book, reviews the rich introspection of the author, which kept the author alive in the most hopeless of situations, first to the rescue came a cold detached curiosity concerning one's fate. Next to follow swiftly were the strategies to preserve the remnants of one's life though the chances of surviving are minimal. Inhuman hunger, humiliation, fear and deep anger at injustices are rendered tolerable by the closely guarded images of the beloved persons, by religion, by a grim sense of humor, and even by the glimpses of the healing beauties of nature. Sometimes during the terrible ordeal, Frankl's thoughts would cling to the image of his wife, ill-fed, in rags walking to his work site in dark wintry nights, "but my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with uncanny acuteness" (48). Wiesel, in his book *Night* and *Memoirs*, reached out to the healing powers of religion, despite the staggering doubts which assailed him as it did his fellow survivors, for him it was not an unquestioned submission to the will of Almighty. God was countless times put into trials in the concentration camps, the hanging of a small boy occasioned such a doubt, "For God's sake, where is God? And from within me, I heard a voice answer: Where is he? This is where--- hanging here from the gallows..." (65).

Wiesel however refused to abandon faith, the only antidote to the misery and degradation of human soul that he witnessed in the camps. His faith remained intact even after the tumultuous strife raging in the deepest recess of his soul, it grew in strength, sustained by the idea of protest within the framework of religion, circumscribed, hence never allowed to implode the firm structures of belief--- the belief which eventually lends meaning and purpose to the very existence, “I never renounced my faith in god. I have risen against his justice, protested his silence and sometimes his absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it” (84). Elie Wiesel invokes the Jewish concept of messianism, in his work which rejects the present and the possibility of meliorative progress, is ambiguously pessimistic and passive, but also wildly expectant and vigilant. Expectation, readiness wakefulness, but also profound, humility and patience—these are the extremes between which the Jewish messianism wavers. The profound meaning of existence, the purpose of sufferings, and the silent voices of protest were explored within these confines, without demolishing completely, the firm foundations of hope. In *Night* the author documents the tragedy of loss, of faith, of meaning and what it entailed for the sensitive souls struggling to come to terms with the wretched realities of human life in Nazi incarceration, Akiba Drumer, a fellow inmate falls victim to the infamous selection, “But as soon as he felt the first chinks in his faith, he lost all incentives to fight and opened the door to death” (77).

In the case of Victor Frankl, the existential despair was channelized as in Wiesel, but in his desire to leave his contribution as a psychologist to posterity. The fact that he had lost a manuscript due for publication at the entry to Auschwitz, bolstered his will to rewrite it and prevented him from being consumed by the flames of existential angst, “Certainly, my deep desire to write this manuscript anew helped me to survive the rigors of the camp I was in”(109). Frankl’s concept of Logotherapy, centers around the Greek word ‘Logos’ which denotes meaning, and, his exposition of this concept, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, brought into existence the concept of “Noogenic Neuroses” which was to be differentiated from the traditional Neurosis i.e psychological Neuroses. It diverged from the original one by its emphasis on the ‘Noological(mind) dimension of human existence. Noogenic neuroses did not develop due to dichotomy or conflict between drives and instincts, but rather from existential problems, among many such problems, the frustration of will to meaning played a great role.

Documented amongst some of the most poignant scenes in *Night* were the subtleties of a father-son relationship, is explored and exposed to soul stripping search, in the harsh dehumanized confines of the concentration camps. It is in those frail moments, fighting every inch for mere existence, that we come across, what Frankl calls in his thesis Noo-dynamics, which is pitted against “homostasis, a kind of mental equilibrium which is achieved through this “tensionless” state of mind. A young, loving and devoted son is advised to weigh the relative chances of survival against his old sick father and tip the scale of survival in favor of the most probable survivor, in this case, his own self, this extreme unrest however does not plunge Elie

Wiesel into a chasm of complete despair, "I listened to him without interrupting. He was right, I thought deep down, not daring to admit it to myself. Too late to save your father... you could have two rations of bread, two rations of soup... it was only a fraction of second, but it left me feeling guilty. I ran to get some soup and brought it to my father" (111). Frankl posits the view that some degree of conflict or tension is a prerequisite for sound mental health, as against the completely sanitized tensionless mind. A gap between one's achievement and his future goals, what one is, and that one should strive to become; such struggles are inherent in human beings and hence indispensable to mental health. "What man needs is not homeostasis but what I call Noo-Dynamics, i.e, the Existential dynamics in a polar field of tension in which one pole is represented by a meaning that has to be fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfill it" (110). The Noo-Dynamics generated by the desire to yield to the law of 'survival of the fittest' and the enduring love of a dutiful son for his sick, helpless father, rescues Wiesel from the detrimental impact of valueless life.

The act of documentation, of the sufferings of fellow human beings was almost a therapeutic response to survivor's guilt, experienced by ones who made it out alive. Both these authors wrote to heal their souls. Frankl observes in his work that suffering can be meaningful only when, life's meaning is an unconditional one, "That unconditional meaning, however, is paralleled by the unconditional value of each and every person. It is that which warrants the indelible quality of dignity of man, just as life remains potentially meaningful under any conditions, even the miserable ones, so does value of each and every person stay with him or her..."(151) and Wiesel echoes familiar sentiment, in his Noble Prize acceptance speech, as he embraces the entire spectrum of suffering fellow beings across the nations, irrespective of their race, religion and nationality: " 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..."(120).

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