

Bearing Witness to Darkness: *Resilience as a Path to Peace in Elie Wiesel's Writings*

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust was an event that transformed the lives of Jews. Those who survived this catastrophe came back with a shattered psyche. It was very difficult for them to forget their dead ones and move on with their lives. Even after their irreplaceable loss, the survivors tried to fill the vacuum created by the traumatic event by reassembling their lives. Survivors presented a finest example of indefatigable human spirit that kept on struggling even after the de-humanizing and terrible conditions. Wiesel has also presented the same in his novels. Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor and Jewish American Novelist who won Nobel Peace prize in 1986. The theme of "Resilience and Survival" is explored through- out his writings. This study aims to underscore the resilience of survivors by employing the theories proposed by Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub regarding the aftermath of trauma. A textual analysis of Elie Wiesel's writings has been undertaken to examine how trauma modifies the course of life. How can those who have been through trauma get their spirit of resilience back? What do people need to move forward in their lives, and how do Elie Wiesel's novels show this?

Keywords: *Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Elie Wiesel, Resilience, Trauma,*

Human life is full of unexpected and unfortunate experiences. One can fall victim to myriads of traumatic events- natural or unnatural. Holocaust was also such an event that transformed the lives of Jews. Millions of innocent men, women and children were murdered mercilessly by Nazis on the command of Hitler. Jews were deported from their homes to the concentration camps, packed in box cars, there they were stripped, shaved, disinfected and treated with almost unimaginable cruelty. Auschwitz, Treblinka and Chelmno were major camps. Those who survived this catastrophe came back with a shattered psyche. It was very difficult for them to forget their dead ones and move on with their lives. Many of them were the sole survivors. The images of brutal killings of their parents, selection process, infants thrown into the gas chambers, merciless hangings, pangs of hunger, confined spaces and death marches were impossible to forget. Even after their irreplaceable loss, the survivors tried to fill the vacuum created by the traumatic event by reassembling their lives. Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor and Jewish American Novelist who won Nobel Peace prize in 1986. The Trauma through which he underwent, affected him to this extent that he was mute for ten long years. He was unable to find the accurate words to voice his traumatic

experiences. But after that, he has written more than fifty works of fiction and non-fiction. The theme of “Resilience and Survival” is explored throughout his writings.

The aftereffects of trauma and the indomitability of the human spirit have been extensively discussed by prominent trauma and psychoanalytical theorists. In order to move forward in life, survivors require a purpose and a compassionate ear to whom they may confess the wounds they sustained. The protagonists in Wiesel's novels experienced a severe form of trauma; however, they remain devoid of vengeance. They rise from the ashes, much like the sphinx, and strive to establish a tranquil and productive environment that is beneficial to both themselves and those in their vicinity. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the spirit of resilience and its various facets. Wiesel's writings, despite his advocacy for moving forward, never advocate for “forgetting.” He regards “forgetting” as a form of betrayal. Wiesel has given the message of “Never forget” and “Never Again.” Both of which are integral to the resiliency process for individuals and communities.

In “Trauma, PTSD, and Resilience” Christine E. Agaibi has defined resilience as “an ability of an object to restore its original structural form, despite being temporarily altered by external forces that would “bend” or “compress” its shape” (197). In simple words, it can be described as one's ability to adapt and cope successfully despite threatening or challenging circumstances. It is a healthy recovery from extreme stress and trauma. An ability to bear the losses and regaining one's self even after extremity of the traumatic event. The first step towards this was recreating a family through marriage. They called it a kind of revenge against Nazis who wanted to annihilate them completely.

Survivors presented a finest example of indefatigable human spirit that kept on struggling even after the de-humanizing and terrible conditions. Wiesel has also presented the same in his novels. The protagonists of Wiesel's novels try hard to begin a new life, not by forgetting their dead ones but by keeping their memories alive. To forget was a kind of betrayal for them. However, it was really difficult to carry the burden of the traumatic memories. This is the reason that many of them fall victim to PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* described PTSD as an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event often occurs in uncontrollable, repetitive appearances of hallucinations.

Schiraldi divided the traumatic memories into two parts- “Associated” and “Dissociated.” Associated memories include conscious thoughts. In this a victim can easily recall the memories and can control his reaction to those memories. On the other hand, in Dissociated memories, a person has no control on himself. He always tries to avoid the traumatic memories because they can work as triggers. When both these memories lost connection, it resulted in PTSD. Through speech therapy or NET a therapist tries to join them so that he can initiate the process of resilience. A therapist made them face these memories. It is like “Waking the Tiger” or terrible memories so that they can be healed.

Elie Wiesel's life is also an example of this. His life seemed so meaningless to him until he met Francis Mauriac who motivated him to write not only for himself but also for all those who died without any reason. He realized that survivors must live in order to testify otherwise

whole world would soon forget them forever. It is not good to send those six million innocent Jews into oblivion. Writing gave him a new power of resilience. He started a new life and wrote a good number of books. Another example is that of Primo Levi who was also a Holocaust survivor and Italian Jewish writer. He mentioned in his *Survival in Auschwitz* that after liberation if he managed to survive then only because of his friend Lorenzo. Despair is the greatest enemy of resilience. It is very important to fight against it but only fighting is not enough it must also be defeated. Otherwise it will overshadow the lives and crumble them into pieces and thus proclaim a victory on the part of the torturers.

An important step towards resilience is breaking the silence. This act of voicing the wounds helps in forming the connection and provides encouragement necessary to heal from their experiences. Silence only makes them isolated in their misery. Therefore, telling someone about their victimization is a courageous act that often provides emotional relief along with a connection to others similarly hurt. Yet, not everyone can bear witness to stories of suffering and thus may minimize or avoid it when survivors choose to break the silence.

Thus resilience can be achieved with the help of a sympathetic listener. Without leaving the burden of memories behind, one cannot move forward. Victims need in the form of a therapist an active and sympathetic listener on whom they can rely and who could help them in transforming their silence into speech. Dori Laub in his essay "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening" has mentioned some of the guidelines for a listener. He should be like a 'blank screen' without any biased attitude. He should not interrupt the speaker because "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (59). An example of this can be seen in Wiesel's *A Mad Desire to Dance*. The protagonist of that novel was a second generation Holocaust survivor. He was unable to move on in his life. He could have found solace in words only but all words seemed inadequate and lifeless to him. Even ordinary or everyday words like hunger, thirst, fear, transport, selection, fire and chimney became horrible and worked as reminders of trauma. George Steiner in *Language and Silence* wrote, "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason" (146). This is even stated by W. G. Sebald in his *On the Natural History of Destruction* also advocates the same reason behind muteness of survivors- Inadequacy of language. He writes Language "ultimately proves inadequate as a cure for the precious condition of a man losing faith in the world again daily, when, on getting up, he sees his Auschwitz number tattooed on his forearm..." (166).

So in that Novel *A Mad Desire to Dance* Doriel Waldman went to a psychotherapist named Therese Goldschmidt to find solace for his troubled mind. She performed NET or Narrative Exposure Therapy on him. A technique, in which a victim tries to make a chronological account of all the events happened in his life. A therapist tries to provide coherence to the events and thus it enables the victim to come out of the trauma which is very important to achieve resilience. Therese probed the dark recesses of Doriel's mind and in the end he became able to start his life afresh. Doriel called her "healer of wounds." She "spends her life probing the unconscious- that strongbox and trash bin of knowledge and experience, those subterranean archives that can and must be deciphered- and asking childish or harebrained

questions” (04). Doriel was afraid of marrying and bringing children to this world because he was unable to trust anyone. He feared that his children would also be born with the tinge of his despair and thus would be doomed beforehand. But Therese changed his mind completely. Later on, he started his life with a girl named Liatt and also had children.

To start the life afresh, it is very important to have a reason or meaning in life. One must not feel unwanted. Frankl has taken up such an issue in his book *Man's search for Meaning* and this invented a term called “Logotherapy.” Logos is a word of Greek origin which means “meaning” and this therapy focuses on the unsettled minds of the survivors for the settlement of which it serves to find a meaning. Logotherapy is based on the notion that discovering a meaning is milestone to recovery. Frankl's theory presents a contrast to Freudian theory of Psychoanalysis which was primarily based on the pleasure principle. In this therapy, a victim is made to realize his responsibility. But a logotherapist cannot act like a moral judge who is pronouncing his judgment or has assumed the role of a preacher. This therapy is beyond both teaching and preaching. The role of the logotherapist is like that of an eye specialist who should make the victim capable of seeing the world in its actuality and not of a painter to paint an ideal picture of the world based on his own perception. So a logotherapist helps one by widening and broadening his vision that enables him to find a purpose in life. In comparison with psychoanalysis, “this method is less retrospective and more introspective. It focuses on the future rather than on the past” (104). Difference between Psychoanalytical process and logotherapy is that in Psychoanalysis, the victim tries to make a detailed account of his past while lying on a couch. On the other hand, in logotherapy a victim is made to hear the things that he otherwise avoids. It helps him in restoring his inner self. Frankl quoted Nietzsche to prove his point “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.” A logotherapist helps him in finding that why so that he could be able to tolerate the how.

Sigmund Freud's Transference and Projection is another technique to achieve resilience. Transference is to transfer one's feelings to another person. As a victim transfer his fears, anxieties and sorrow to a therapist. A therapist thus becomes the co- owner of the trauma and helps him in coming to cross- roads. Projection is attribution of one's ill or unwanted feelings to others. As in the case of onlookers in order to lessen their guilt, they projected their feelings to Jews and began to declare that they deserved this. Resilience can also be understood in terms of Post Traumatic Growth. It includes all the positive changes occurred in the life of a person after the trauma. It was coined by psychologists Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun in the mid-1990s. It is a way to maintain a “balance between confronting and avoiding trauma related thoughts, feelings and images.” In short, it is a state in which “victims become survivors” (Janoff 169). Tedeschi and Calhoun defined Posttraumatic Growth as “positive psychological change experienced as the result of a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Stanton 77). However, it does not mean that through this process they will be able to attain their previous self. It is just a signal that indicates the beginning of a new era in the life of the survivors. After this they just start connecting with others, sharing their emotions with others and also begin to think about their life goals. So as it is stated earlier, the ability to narrate the traumatic incident is the first step towards Post Traumatic growth. One has to “acknowledge openly and examine deeply the

disequilibrating impact of the traumatic event on the self" ("The Transformed Self" 66). Wiesel's characters like Wiesel were always in favour of peace rather than violence and revenge. Wiesel is called "Messenger of Peace." In his first memoir *Night* he has stated that even after the liberation "... no thought of revenge, or of parents. Only of bread. And even when we were No longer hungry, not one of us thought of revenge...." (133) The message of reconciliation and peace instead of retribution and revenge, is central to his writings.

So, regardless the nature of trauma and its severity, the most important factor for resilience is the perception of self- efficacy. Therapists do not tell the victims how to achieve resilience rather they help them in self-understanding that lead them towards self- growth. Writing can be another way in this. One can pen down his experiences as it was done by Elie Wiesel himself. For resilience it is important to understand that in order to start over they have to let go. Holocaust was not an event that just happened in the past and that can be forgotten now. The survivors of Holocaust with their resilience have presented an example before all the trauma- ridden people in the present times. They have proved this fact that life goes on no matter what happens.

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