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Witness to Holocaust : A Study of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*

Abstract :

Holocaust was an unimaginable, gory event unleashed by Hitler against Jews. Six million Jews are said to be perished in the Nazi concentration camps. This catastrophic event has been articulated in literature. A great number of diaries, memoirs and fictional works have dealt with this inhuman event. The Nazi era and the life in the concentration camps have been well documented in these writings. This article focuses on Anne Frank's Diary and Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a work describing his experiences in the concentration camps.

Key words : Anne Frank, Diary, holocaust, Elie Wiesel, Night, Jews, concentration camps, child diaries

Holocaust was an unbelievable reality which happened during World War II, when Hitler was the Chancellor of Germany. His paranoid attitude towards Jews resulted in the setting up of concentration camps in the German-occupied territories and millions of Jews were dumped there ; they were systematically starved, tortured and ultimately put to death. In spite of its enormity, holocaust has inspired a great deal of writing. Countless works have been written on holocaust both by the actual witnesses

and by those who had vicarious experience of the catastrophe. This article deals with *Anne Frank, a Young Girl's Diary* and Eli Wiesel's *Night*- a holocaust narrative. While Anne perished in the holocaust, Wiesel survived to tell it all about the holocaust.

The Nazis did not spare even children as millions of Jewish children were persecuted during the holocaust. Quite a few of these children wrote diaries and journals that have survived. On the one hand, these diaries reveal the psychology of young children and adolescents ; on the other hand, they remain moving document of the holocaust days from the perspective of young minds. Each diary reflects a fragment of its author's life. Taken together, the diary provides readers with a varied and complex view of young people who lived and died during the Holocaust. In these diaries, the young writers documented their experiences, confided their feelings and reflected on the trauma they endured during these nightmare years. Anne Frank who wrote her diary in hiding with her family and a handful of acquaintances in an attic warehouse in Amsterdam is the most famous child diarist of the Holocaust era.

Anne Frank was born in Frankfurt, Germany on June 12, 1929 she was the second daughter of business man Otto Frank and his wife Edith. When the Nazis seized power in January 1933, the Franks fled to Amsterdam in order to evade the anti Jewish measures of the new regime. Anne received an autograph book for her twelfth birthday and began to use the volume as her diary, keeping a detailed account of events that took place in the "secret annex". Acting on an anonymous tip, the German Security Police discovered the Franks hiding place on August 4, 1944, and deported the inhabitants of the annex via Westbrook to Auschwitz. In late October or early November 1944, Anne and her sister Margot arrived with a transport from Auschwitz to Bergen Belsen where both succumbed to typhus in late February or early March 1945. Following the war, Anne's father Otto Frank the sole survivor of the group, returned to Amsterdam in the summer of 1945, where former employee *Miep Gies* gave him Anne's diary and some further papers which she found in the annex after the arrests. The diary first appeared in the Netherlands in 1947. Published in English in 1952 as "The Diary of a Young Girl" the war time journal of Anne Frank has become world's most widely read books, transforming its author into a symbol of hundreds of thousands of children murdered in the Holocaust.

Anne Frank's diary was famous to such an extent that for a time, it eclipsed other works written by children during the Holocaust. Nevertheless as interest in the Holocaust has increased, so has the publication of many more diaries, shedding light on the wartime lives of

young people under Nazi oppression. Young journal writers of this period came from all walks of life. Some child diarists came from poor or peasants families. Others were born to middle class professionals. Some grew up in wealth and privilege. A handful came from deeply religious families, while others grew up in an assimilated and secular community. A majority of child diarists however identified with Jewish tradition and culture regardless of their degree of personal faith. Child diaries and journals from the Holocaust era can be grouped into three broad categories:

1. Those written by children who escaped German controlled territory and became refugees or partisans.
2. Those written by children living in hiding and
3. Those maintained by young people as ghetto residents, as persons living under other restrictions imposed by German authorities or, more rarely, as concentration camp prisoners (*encyclopedia.ushmm.org*)

The Refugee diaries were often composed in the late 1930s or early 1940s by children of assimilated Jewish parents from Germany, Austria, or Czech lands. Many of these diaries address the issue of displacement, as all these child writers had sacrificed the familiarity of home to seek refuge among strangers in distant countries. Some writers like Jutta Salzburg Lilly Cohen and Elizabeth Kaufmann fled with siblings or parents. Some other writers arrived in strange lands. Child diarists who emigrated by legal means often described the tremendous bureaucratic difficulties involved in securing a safe haven and in obtaining the necessary visas and papers required for emigration. Diarists who fled illegally portray the harrowing journey through dangerous terrain and the constant fear of being apprehended. Regardless of their means of escape, however, refugee diaries reflect a painful and confusing loss of home, language and culture; the devastating separation from family and friends; and the challenge of adapting to life in an unfamiliar and sometimes alienating world.

Like Anne Frank some young people lived in hiding to evade German authorities: in attics, bunkers and cellars throughout eastern and western Europe. The writers including Otto Wolf reflect the difficulties and dangers of their concealments. These children remained physically concealed for a significant portion, or for the entirety, of their time in hiding. Youngsters often had to remain silent or even motionless in their hiding places for hours at a time. Both children and their protectors lived in constant fear lest a raised voice or a footfall should rouse the suspicion of their neighbors. Other young people in concealment, like child diarist Moshe Flinker hid in plain sight, passing as non Jews through the dubious protection of false papers and an assumed identity. These children had to adapt swiftly and completely

to their new identities and environments. Young people learned to answer to their fictive name, and to avoid language or mannerisms that might betray their origins.

As most Jewish children were hidden by individuals or by religious institutions who embraced faiths different from their own, youngsters learned to recite the prayers and catechism of their “adopted” religion in order to avert the suspicions of both adults and their peers. One false word or gesture was sufficient to endanger both the child and his or her rescuers. Children and young people residing in ghettos in German occupied Europe wrote the majority of diaries that have surfaced from the era of the Holocaust. Ghetto diaries often reflect the segregation, isolation, and vulnerability of their authors. They capture the extreme physical suffering and deprivation experienced by their authors and presents the complex hardships and adversities that Jews faced in their struggle to survive. In ghetto diaries the reader finds a firsthand account of the terror and violence of Nazi persecution, but also reads about young people who attempted to transcend their circumstances through study, creativity and play.

The former sites of many ghettos in German controlled Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and the former Soviet Union have yielded many diaries and journals written by children. A number of wartime diaries came from the ghettos in Baltic countries. Quite a large number of diaries survived from *Theresenstadt* in Bohemia. Many diaries were written by children outside the wall of ghetto. Diaries by children, teenagers, and young adults during the era of the Holocaust reflect a great variety of personal backgrounds and wartime circumstances. Their authors often addressed themes such as the nature of human suffering, the moral and ethical dimensions of persecutions and the struggle of hope against despair.

Anne Frank’s diary reveals the thought process of an adolescent young girl, of course living in exceptional circumstances. The diary brings out her complex attitude towards those surrounding her. Her love for her father was great as the latter testified : “I got on better with Anne than with Margot, who was more attached to her mother. The reason for that may have been that Margot rarely showed her feelings and didn't need as much support because she didn't suffer from mood swings as much as Anne did”(Muller 203) ; on the other hand, initially Anne was jealous of her sister Margot for the latter being the family’s favourite. As they grew, there developed a bonding between the two sisters as revealed by the diary. Astonishingly, Anne had a difficult relationship with her mother which bordered on the levels of hatred. In the diary entry made on 7 November 1942 Anne described her "contempt" for her mother and her inability to "confront her with her carelessness, her sarcasm and her hard-heartedness," before concluding, "She's not a

mother to me” (Diary 63). After sometime, Anne becomes self-critical of her attitude towards her mother. She chides herself: "Anne, is it really you who mentioned hate, oh Anne, how could you?"(Diary 157). Soon she could get rid of her negative tendencies towards her mother and could remain close to her.

Even in hiding, the Frank sisters were creative. They nurtured hopes for future. Margot learned short hand ; on the other hand, Anne read, wrote and edited her diary entries. As she matured, she thought and wrote about abstract subjects like God and the human nature. She wrote about her feelings, beliefs, and ambitions, subjects she felt she could not discuss with anyone. Unfortunately, she found no confidants or intellectual companions to whom she could share her feelings and ideas. But Anne cannot be faulted for this.

In his essay, “What I Believe”, E.M.Forster, while advocating a pragmatic kind of living, invokes the Scandinavian legend of Niebelung’s ring. According to the legend, Fafnir, the dragon which is capable of destroying the world is in deep slumber. In the mean time, productive and intelligent life goes on in the world as symbolized by the *valkyries*(61). It is foolhardy to taunt and beard the sleeping danger and invite trouble. Anne and Morgat prove to be vulturies.

Anne aspired to become a journalist as revealed in the moving diary entry made on Wednesday, 5 April 1944:

I finally realized that I must do my schoolwork to keep from being ignorant, to get on in life, to become a journalist, because that's what I want! I know I can write ..., but it remains to be seen whether I really have talent ...

And if I don't have the talent to write books or newspaper articles, I can always write for myself. But I want to achieve more than that. I can't imagine living like Mother, Mrs. van Daan and all the women who go about their work and are then forgotten. I need to have something besides a husband and children to devote myself to! ...

I want to be useful or bring enjoyment to all people, even those I've never met. I want to go on living even after my death! And that's why I'm so grateful to God for having given me this gift, which I can use to develop myself and to express all that's inside me!

When I write I can shake off all my cares. My sorrow disappears, my spirits are revived! But, and that's a big question, will I ever be able to write something great, will I ever become a journalist or a writer?(*quoted by Marcuse*)

Anne continued writing regularly until her last entry of 1 August 1944. On 4th August 1944, Anne and her family were arrested and were sent to concentration camps. In February 1945, Anne died in the camp. Except Otto Frank, the entire family perished in the holocaust.

Elie Wiesel was a Jewish-American of Romanian descent. He was a Professor, Nobel Laureate, writer and a fighter for Jewish/ liberal causes worldwide. Wiesel was born in 1928 and died in 2016. He was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. His first hand experience of the holocaust made him a peace activist at global level. Through his indefatigable service for Jewish causes and global peace, he could overcome the shame and trauma of his past.

Wiesel was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 1986 and the [Norwegian Nobel Committee](#) called him a "messenger to mankind", stating that through his struggle to come to terms with "his own personal experience of total humiliation and of the utter contempt for humanity shown in [Hitler's](#) death camps", as well as his "practical work in the cause of peace", Wiesel had delivered a message "of peace, atonement, and human dignity" to humanity (*Wikipedia, Wiesel*). The phrase "practical work in the cause of peace" sums up the life-philosophy of Elie Wiesel.

As a young boy, he was put in the concentration camp along with his father. While his father died in the camp, Wiesel was liberated by the American forces. Later, Wiesel has written holocaust narratives like *Night*, *All Rivers Run to Sea* and *Childhood and Society*.

Night is the first of Wiesel's trilogy—*Night, Dawn and Day*. Fittingly, *Night* deals with the holocaust years and the other two books deal with the post-holocaust life of Wiesel. "In *Night*," Wiesel said, "I wanted to show the end, the finality of the event. Everything came to an end—man, history, literature, religion, God. There was nothing left. And yet we begin again with night(*quoted by Sternlicht*).

Night deals with memorable persons and incidents. The work deals with life in Sighet in 1941. The book's narrator is Eliezer, an orthodox scholar of Judaism. He is often moved by the Jewish sufferings documented in writings. He finds a kinship with Moshe, the Beadle, a caretaker of the house of prayer.

In June 1941, the Jews who could not prove their citizenship were deported by the Hungarian government. There were trains carrying loads of Jews out of Hungary. Moshe is dumped in one such train going to Poland. In Poland, the Jews were arrested and taken to concentration camps. Many were killed straightaway; even babies were not spared; young girls were abused. Moshe miraculously escaped back to Sighet and warned the remaining Jews of the things to come. He literally begs: "*Jews, listen to me! It's all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me*" (Night 17). Unfortunately, his words were not believed by others.

Then, the arrival of the Germans to Sighet is described. The Nazis arrive and compel the Jews to live in ghettos. The Jews are restricted in many ways; their normal life is affected; still, they try to put up with the new situation, hoping for a better future. Elizer shares this optimism with fellow Jews: "We should no longer have before our eyes those hostile faces, those hate-laden stares. ... The general opinion was that we were going to remain in the ghetto until the end of the war, until the arrival of the Red Army. Then everything would be as before. It was neither German nor Jew who ruled the ghetto—it was illusion"(Night 9-10).

Soon, the situation turned to worse. In May 1944, the Jews were forcibly taken from the ghettos and were sent to concentration camps. The situation was ominous and the sight of the weapon-wielding Hungarian police was irritating to the young Elizer: "It was from that moment that I began to hate them, and my hate is still the only link between us today" (Night 17).

Later, Elizer and his family along with the other Jews were taken to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. There, he and his father were sent to hard labour while his mother and sisters were sent to gas chamber.

Men to the left! Women to the right!

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. ... For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sisters moving away to the right. Tzipora held Mother's hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair ...and I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever(Night 27).

In the camp, Elizer witnesses the all-round deterioration of his father; now he has to take care of his father. Also, the atrocities happening around the young boy makes him to question the existence of God. The nightmarish reality of children being dumped into fire affects Eliezer deeply.

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never (*Night 32*).

Later, Elizer and his father are taken to the work camp at Buna. Here also, the situation is no different. The holocaust has severely damaged Weisel's faith in God because of the latter's inability to prevent the holocaust. Elizer refused to celebrate the Jewish New Year.

Blessed be God's name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. . . Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including **Sabbath** and the **Holy Days**? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: **Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe**, who **chose us** among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces? ... But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused (*Night 64*).

Later, the Jews were led on a death march to the camp in Buchenwald. There Elizer's father dies. Elizer does not reveal his emotions and even considers the death as a kind of liberation: "I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I had no more tears. And, in the depths of my being, in the recesses of my weakened conscience, could I have searched for it, I might perhaps have found something like – free at last" (*Night 105*).

To conclude, on the one hand, Anne's diary reveals her short-life, lived as optimistically as possible. On the other hand, her diary is a grim testimony to holocaust, the man-made catastrophe. Wiesel's *Night* too is a moving account of the dark, chilling days of the holocaust. Thus, Anne's diary and Wiesel's *Night*, like all other holocaust

literature, pull up the human conscience ; for, it was the human indifference which allowed the holocaust to happen. The holocaust literature warns humanity , not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

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