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**Community Culture As Pragmatic
Tool For Survival In Concentration Camps: The Inner And Outer
World Of Charlotte Delbo**

Ms. Parvesh

(Regd. No 41300121)

Ph.D. Scholar

Supervised By

Dr J.P. Aggarwal

Assistant Professor

Lovely Professional University

India

Abstract

The Holocaust literature of Charlotte Delbo throws a flood of light on the brutal atrocities of the Nazis. Her Memoirs, novels, lectures and interviews describe her perception about the life before and after Auschwitz. Like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, Charlotte Delbo was also the victim of the atrocities of German Gestapo. Delbo spent twenty seven months in different concentration camps including “Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Ravensbruck” Delbo evolved her own strategy and mechanism to escape death and selection to the gas chambers. She organized a co-operative of women and formed a unity to fight and resist the barbaric cruelties of the Nazis. The *Trilogy* of Delbo is a harrowing description of physical and psychological traumatic experiences of women prisoners of Auschwitz. Delbo didn't believe that she survived the Auschwitz; she became a forceful voice speaking to the world the enormity of the human degradation. Her community culture proved very effective in helping each other in the hour of crisis. In the hours of death and destruction, Delbo experienced that patience; rational thinking and balance of mind are essential prerequisites to survive.

Key Words: Traumatic, Holocaust, Community, Barbaric, Trilogy, Strategy

Like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, Delbo is a prominent Holocaust writer who dared to narrate her individual experiences of Auschwitz. Delbo wrote her *Trilogy* not for any material motive but for the sake of humanity. She wrote *None of Us Will Return* in 1946 but didn't publish it until 1965. Her second volume *Useless Knowledge* was written in 1946 but it appeared only on 1970. The *Trilogy* is a harrowing description of physical and psychological traumatic experiences of women prisoners of Auschwitz. Delbo didn't believe that she survived the Auschwitz; she became a forceful voice speaking to the world the enormity of the human degradation. Delbo in Auschwitz overworked and almost got exhausted; she remained undernourished as the food was horrible. She was depressed to witness the overwhelming brutal events in the camp that she started challenging the existence of God. She combines poetry and prose majestically in *Auschwitz and After*, covering themes of death, brutality, beauty, camaraderie, strength, friendship, family, loyalty and pain. Nicole Thatcher (2006) observes that "She is the rare woman to have "written about Birkenau, the woman's camp which had the dual function of concentration and extermination". (Thatcher 42) Her *Trilogy* is loaded with the memorable episodes in poetry and prose drawing on the techniques of surrealism and the theatre of the absurd. Delbo's *Trilogy* has three parts; *None of Us Will Return*, *Useless Knowledge* and *Days and Memory*. The exceptional thing of Delbo's *Trilogy* is her depiction of two selves of Delbo; the self before Auschwitz and her post Auschwitz self. Delbo gives a powerful image of snake to depict the destructive powers of Auschwitz. When she came back from the concentration camps, Delbo had lost her identity and lived with fragmented identity. The snake throws away its skin; it shrivels and disintegrates after some time. Delbo observes thus:

I am fortunate in not recognizing myself in the self that was in Auschwitz....I feel that the one who was in the camp is not me, is not the person who is here, facing you. (Delbo xi)

Delbo begins her traumatic journey in remembering her hellish life in Auschwitz. The memory of her Auschwitz experience is so deep in her heart that she calls Nazi "an abyss". Lawrence Langer observed that Delbo's description of Holocaust experience is "the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century" (Langer vii) Delbo's journey to hell started from Compiegne to Auschwitz. The interesting part of the narration is the dream element which makes her

experiences a psychological study. Earnest Hartman and J. Allan Hobson observe that dreaming is a cognitive state of mind. The juxtaposition of dream and reality adds to the aesthetic quality of the *Trilogy*. The first section of her Memoir is *None of Us Will Return* begins with the flood images symbolizing her traumatic journey. The image of station is very effective; “they think they are arrived in hell” (*Auschwitz* 4). The station is desolate and men and children are waiting anxiously. Delbo gives the metaphor of “waiting” alluding to the poems of T.S. Eliot; in *The Waste Land* people are seen waiting in an alley “where dead men lost their bones.” It is “a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving, a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those who have left never come back” (*Auschwitz* 19). In the station people arrive and depart by in the station of the concentration camp it is “the end of the track”. (*Auschwitz* 20) The long eighteen days of journey made them sick and decadent; they lost their minds; murdering one another in desperation in the boxcars.

There are those who having journeyed for eighteen days lost their minds, murdering one another inside boxcars and those who suffocated during the trip when they were tightly packed together they will not step out. (*Auschwitz* 6-7) Delbo’s arrival in the concentration camp gave her an unimaginable shock as she couldn’t imagine the magnitude of inhuman cruelty. As the cars stopped she heard “Cries, shouts, incomprehensible orders, dogs, SS, machine guns, the clanging of weapons. A roadside that was not a station. The cold was piercing” (*Auschwitz* 5). It was a one way journey because there was no exit; only arrival was certain and the departure of the prisoners was uncertain in Auschwitz. The universe of Auschwitz was a unique world in which the very word of the Gestapo was a law. The first destructive thing Delbo observed in Auschwitz was the process of dehumanization; to transform a human being to nothing. All the prisoners were deprived of possessions and clothing. This symbolized the process of turning them to animals as they don’t need clothes. Thomas Trezise called it as the “first greatest Nazis’ attack on humanity. *Auschwitz and After* “teems with accounts of the degraded bodies of the dead and the anguishing bodies of the living.” (Trezise 877) The prisoners evolved a new strategy to survive and to fight with the forces of Nazi. They borrowed this tool from the world of animals; the herd lives together so the prisoners also started fighting collectively. In the following passage, Delbo illustrates the collective suffering of her fellow prisoners:

We watch with eyes that cry out, eyes full of disbelief. Each face is inscribed with such precision over the icy light, the blue of the sky, that it remains marked there for eternity. For eternity, these shaven heads, squeezed against one another, bursting with shouts, mouths twisted by cries we do not hear, hands waving in a mute cry. The cries remain inscribed upon the blue of the sky (*Auschwitz* 36-37).

. Delbo observes that the prisoners lose their individual human value and turn into materialized cries, "cries that have assumed female bodies" (*Auschwitz* 36). They are transformed into a mass of compressed, hairless heads, screaming mouths, and reaching hands. The intensity and inhumanity of their collective suffering is very painful and the scene is indeed heart rending. Their screams and cries symbolize their collective offense against humanity. They looked helpless looking at the sky and each helpless face "remains marked [on the sky] for eternity" (*Auschwitz* 37). Delbo could never forget this horrible scene of inhumanity and this scene always haunted her. Rose Kamel (2009) observes that in this horrible scene Delbo has articulated "the gap [...] between meaningless death in and the ordinary death that ends the course of life in a human environment" (Kamel, 78). In Auschwitz the prisoners are subjected to death without dignity. It is not only the death of human bodies, but of all the human connections. When man lived in the forest life was very hard and he was always threatened by the forces of Nature and animals and deadly reptiles. Kamel observes that when Delbo witnessed this horrible scene she fused her identity to the identity of the dying.

Delbo's use of synesthesia, where witness and victim are one- female bodies that cry voicelessly, heads bursting with shouts, imprints on the reader's consciousness the lack, then, of an ordinary human environment in a world inhabited only by dummies and truncated women (Kamel, 70).

The prisoners were treated like animals and there was no justification of cruelty and inhuman treatment given to the prisoners. The SS guards least bothered about the dignity and honor of women as the scenes of prostitution were common in Auschwitz. Delno recalls a scene of cruelty when the SS let dogs to tear away the body of a prisoner. Delbo vividly describes the gruesome episode in simple language how a ferocious police dog was set free to pounce on a woman who screamed in terror:

The woman lets out a scream. A wrenched-out scream. We do not know if the scream has been uttered by her or by us, whether is issued from her punctured throat, or from ours. I feel the dog's fangs in my throat. I scream. I howl. Not a sound comes out of me" (*Auschwitz* 29)

In this cruel and savage environment Delbo explored a new strategy to survive and encounter her tormentors. She organized a community culture; made good women as the members of the community and made a plan to fight with the Nazi forced united and determinedly. This community was to act in secret and the main purpose was to share the grief and sufferings of the members of the community. Delbo and other prisoners entered into Auschwitz as human beings but within hours they were transformed into useless numbers; they were treated like cattle destined for the slaughter house. Delbo records that many women grew weak because of dysentery as the food was unhygienic but they had to be present during the roll call often naked position in the winter cold. Delbo records that most of the inmates were plagued by diarrhea; their bodies deteriorated as they couldn't even stand. Delbo points out how the body of women in Auschwitz suffered from the collision between inside and outside. Delbo recollects that months passed she didn't get time to look at the body. In her chapter: *The Next Day*, Delbo describes a heart rending scene of women being transported to the gas chamber in the cold night. She narrates the episode with the use of images of "night", "snow" and "cold" They were treated like animals." Delbo observes thus: "Once past the gate, we huddle close together as animals do but the cold is so intense we no longer feel it." (*Auschwitz* 31) Even at the face of death they expressed solidarity as Delbo reports:

, One of us stepped to the center of the dormitory and said in a loud voice, addressing all of us, 'Friends, we still have some time before lights out. We should read some poems.' The younger ones set up benches. Everyone takes a seat. It's like the first speak to the others of eating and drinking (*Auschwitz* 121).

The sense of community has given them the strength to live and courage to fight with the cruelty of SS guards. They shared their experiences at night and pain would lessen. Each one of the group would guide the other and warn if something unnatural was observed. In the death camps all women managed to protect one another. Each wishes to remain near a companion, some in

front of a weaker one, so as to be hit in her stead, some behind one no longer able to run, so as to hold her up if she begins to fall.” (*Auschwitz* 92) They would run hours together but in a group the pain would lessen as Delbo recalls:

We did not move. The will to struggle and endure, life itself, had taken refuge in a shrunken part of our bodies, somewhere in the immediate periphery of our hearts. We stood there motionless, several thousand women speaking a variety of languages from all over, huddled together, heads bowed under the snow’s stinging blasts. (*Auschwitz* 40)

All the women prisoners living in Block 25 spoke a common French language so they could recite poems and could recreate aspects of the culture from which they have been erased. Once they performed a Molière play for their recreation. Delbo observes that the recreation of the play was "magnificent, because for two hours, during which the chimneys never stopped emitting the smoke of human flesh, for two hours we believed in all of this. We believed it more that we believed in [...] freedom" (*Auschwitz* 212). Mado was one of the members of her group who was deeply involved with the sufferings of her fellow prisoners. In her section *The Teddy Bear*, Delbo recollects the celebration of Christmas Eve in the death camps. The Polish women helped all in cooking; they passed “time in knitting, drawing and embroidering.” (*Auschwitz* 163) It looked strange as all were in the face of death. Langer observes that Delbo depicts a microcosm of human degradation in her *Trilogy*. She employs “a remarkable style of direct confrontation that lures us into the maelstrom of atrocity while simultaneously drowning all intellectual defenses.” (Langer xiv)

In the concentration camps Delbo evolved the strategy to fight with the harsh environment using her philosophical knowledge. She had explored the stages of the evolution of society and state and had read in story of evolution of civilization. She had read Hobbes, Lock and Rousseau and their philosophical ideas. When man lived in the forest life was very the forces of Nature and animals and deadly reptiles always threatened him. In that stage the only way to exist for his self-preservation was the evolution of community culture. The evolution of community culture was the result of the socio-cultural forces. Community has always acted as a framework for the development of man’s individuality. The social interactions have always

resulted into social change and transformation. Delbo dramatizes her struggle to encounter with the death camps. There are many instances in *Auschwitz and After*, which describe her spirit of co-operation, and community culture that lessened her Delbo is not worried about her individual suffering; pain and physical exhaustion but she is concerned about the sufferings of her fellow prisoners.

Yesterday they were hungry. They were lice-infested and scratched themselves.
Yesterday they gulped their murky gruel. They had diarrhea and were beaten.
Yesterday they suffered. Yesterday they wished to die. (*Auschwitz* 18)

Delbo is deeply involved in the sufferings of others; she is seriously concerned about their freedom from the hell and where never a situation of danger to their life comes she is always there to help them. She played a great role in cementing relationship with her fellow prisoners. At night all would narrate stories; recite poems to forget the horrors of death. Delbo narrates the gruesome tale of the sufferings of the women described as a mutual struggle for survival in death camps. Kamel praises Delbo for her using community culture representing: "a turning point in which the narrator's fragmented self binds [itself] to the bodies of the other women, who in their collective solidarity offer the only means of survival" (Kamel, 68). The strategy to live in together proves very useful helping them to relieve them from pain and anguish. They become courageous to confront the external forces such as cold, and fear of death. Debo uses poetic language to describe the hellish living thus: "Where in a place time is abolished. We don't know whether we exist, only ice, light, dazzling snow, and us , in this ice, this light, this silence." (*Auschwitz* 32) They all speaks French because they are culturally united:

One of us stepped to the center of the dormitory and said in a loud voice, addressing all of us, "Friends, we still have some time before lights out. We should read some poems." The younger ones set up benches. Everyone takes a seat. It's like the first speak to the others of eating and drinking. (*Auschwitz* 121).

Delbo belongs to France and most of her comrades are French speaking so she tries to revive the cultural bond. Delbo uses her theatrical talent to perform the performance of Moliere's play in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. The performance of the play was "magnificent, because

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for two hours, during which the chimneys never stopped emitting the smoke of human flesh, for two hours we believed in all of this. We believed it more that we believed in [...] freedom" (*Auschwitz* 212). Scheiber reasons that "building a community through literature is an integral part of Delbo's poetic" (Scheiber, 5) Living together and sharing the cultural rituals together women form a close identity preserving community.

To conclude, in her *Auschwitz and After*, Delbo describes her faith in the spirit of co-operation and community culture the pragmatic and workable tool to confront the adversities of life. The Zen Buddhist scholars also advocated the community culture the only way to fight the adversities of life. The Upanishads of Indian mythology also urges human beings to fight the battle of life united. Delbo was a learned French woman she used the strategy of community culture to lessen the sufferings of life and to help others in the events of hardships. The strategy worked and they were able to fight against the cruelties of the Nazis in the concentration camps.

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