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STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Abstract:

This research paper is a cross-parallel thematic study of the strategies of survival during the holocaust. The women survivors of the Holocaust wrote about their experience, memories and reflections, which is available in the form of fiction, poetry, drama and memoir. I have attempted a study of the strategies of survival adopted by those women in the ghetto (people were confined in concentration camp during holocaust). The major concern of this paper is to analyze these strategies of survival during the Holocaust. These narratives give accounts of strategies like use of false documents and identities to escape from concentration camps, time and memory,

childbirth and motherhood, mutual assistance, psychological support and sharing of food, mother daughter relationships, sex for survival, reversal of conventional gender roles.

Key words: Holocaust, Strategies, Survival, Narrative, Theme.

Introduction:

The experience of women who survived Nazi cruelty has given way to literary form. They are in the form of experiences, memories and reflections. They wrote in a variety of narratives like, poetry, drama and memoir, they used a range of literary strategies and presented a variety of themes. Women write more frequently and more peripherally, but in limited roles. In addition women who were not victimized by the Nazi genocide also began to write about the Holocaust, based on research.

Though the bulk of Holocaust literature by women is diverse and varied, there are several other themes that predominate. Some of these persistent themes are gender specific, while others characterize Holocaust writing in general. In this paper an attempt is made to study thematically the narratives by interpreting the strategies of survival during the Holocaust that was adopted by various women characters in the narratives. These narratives give accounts of strategies like use of false documents and identities to escape from concentration camps, time and memory, childbirth and motherhood, mutual assistance, psychological support and sharing of food, mother daughter relationships, sex for survival, reversal of conventional gender roles.

Ida Fink, is a Holocaust writer, who was born in Zbaraż, Poland, in 1921. She is an important and powerful writer of the Holocaust literature. She occupies an influential place among established writers as Elie Wiesel, Charlotte Delbo and Primo Levi. Her style of narrative is gentle, lyrical, restrained, and discreet; her approach to the Holocaust is different from that of the other writers who depicted the true horrors of life and death in the concentration camps, but Fink portrays another facet located on the fringes of the Holocaust. Here we find ordinary people (men, women, and children) who constitute more than three million Polish Jews living in small towns and villages of Poland trying to deal with a horror so frightening and offensive that it strains the imagination. Here, as in Auschwitz in a rustic setting of lush green groves, inclined gardens, and deep forests, brutal and cruel atrocities are being committed. Babies are snatched from their parents and shot, neighbours betray each other for rewards, and whole town is rounded up as targets.

Analyzing the Strategies of Survival during the Holocaust:

- **Use of False Documents:**

Fink, the Holocaust writer was confined in the ghetto until 1942. She spends the remaining years of war hiding and on the run, with the help of false identity papers that certifies her as an Aryan. She survives the war under a series of false identities, which is recounted in her fictionalized autobiography "*The Journey*", based on her own experiences during the war where she manages, to serve as a volunteer labourer with the help of the false documents. She points out that it was possible only through great "cleverness and luck". She was able to survive daily life under the very nose of the enemy surrounded by hostile bystanders who were indifferent.

She and her sister pretended to be two young peasant girls and dressed up in:

"old winter coats ... cinched with rawhide belts to make them look more peasant like,"

topped off with the most telling accessory, beautiful kerchiefs for their hair decorated in a popular pattern of

"roses blooming among green leaves."

Fink notes with satisfaction that her looks are more blond but her sister's "Jewish" dark hair is a constant source of anxiety. She often repeats to herself her brother's observation that

"the craziest plans have the greatest chance of succeeding,"

She escapes with her sister from the ghetto and survives.

- **Time and Memory:**

In yet another volume of short stories by Ida Fink, *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories* the focus is on intimate and domestic moments and relationships between spouses, lovers, parents and children and also, between the Jews and their rescuers. Here, the strategies of survival are

essentially the two themes namely time and memory, which are used through this masterful collection.

Both these strategies of survival are introduced in the title story "A Scrap of Time." like

"I want to talk about a certain time,"

"not measured in months and years."

She fears that the moment when 'time' has been

"crushed and destroyed by regular time."

Then she goes on to tell us,

"as I was digging around in the ruins of memory

I find it fresh and untouched by forgetfulness."

Here the narrator – author is recollecting a particular experience or a memory of that experience and is not aware how much time has elapsed after that event and the quote reflects that time is not measured. She also fears that it is a moment when "time" had been destroyed by the regular time. The process of digging in the ruins of memory is surprisingly fresh and untouched by forgetfulness. While referring to the time, people did not talk about days or months but rather about

"the first action, or the second, or right before the third."

Thus, each of the stories that constitute the collection represents the author's diggings into "the ruins of memory" from which she emerges repeatedly with another incomparable literary resurrection or restoration of what has been referred to as

"a world that was and is no more."

In Fink's remarkable writing, the "scraps" of that world are returned to us with such clarity, fidelity, and force as to be without exception unforgettable.

Memory is of course thinking about the past but memory it is also trying to invade the past experiences with a personal or divine intervention. Memory is such an emotion that a person rarely ventures but in the "scraps" narrator starts to narrate about her memory as she recollects it. Memory is sacred for all because it allows one to go back to that particular moment of experience which they have lived. The experience can reflect or relive that moment. So the memory of the narrator of 'A Scrap of time' is really remarkable because she can picture the gruesome sufferings of the people who were taken away in trucks, and how later they were killed.

- **Childbirth and Motherhood:**

During the Holocaust, among the many other challenges was the responsibility of children which placed a special burden on the mothers, who struggled to sustain their family despite the genocidal pressures that made this difficult. In the ghettos, the meagre rations, demanding work details and widespread epidemics complicated the act of mothering. In camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, mothers who arrived with small children or women who arrived pregnant were immediately sent to the death chambers.

The literature by women holocaust writers explores the effects of these harsh circumstances on women's lives and psychology. Pregnancy for Jewish women usually meant a death sentence in the camps, and babies in camps and ghettos often had to be killed to save the mother's life. The early targeting of Jewish children meant that parents often had to make a difficult choice between sending their children away to be hidden with Aryan strangers or keep their children to share their uncertain fate together.

In Ilona Karmel's novel, *An Estate of Memory*, this centres on four women who band together in a labour camp. One woman among the four is pregnant and is determined to carry the pregnancy to term. The other three women help to conceal her pregnancy and provide her with extra nutrition and take on her share of the physical labour. Gradually the four women labour camp inmates succeed in smuggling the baby out of the camp, thereby leading to freedom. Thus, they contribute much to save the mother and child from immediate death. More than merely documenting an unusual set of circumstances, Karmel's novel treats the secret pregnancy as a symbol of the women's inner resistance to the forces of atrocity and the crucial factor by which they evaluate themselves as ethical beings. Karmel's focus on a situation particular to women and pregnancy also provides an opportunity to introspect the elaborate ways in which women's experiences differ from men.

- **Mutual Assistance:**

Many women during their enforced stay in the ghetto created "mutual assistance" groups to share food, information, and also to offer protection. Judith Tydor Baumel, a Holocaust historian, in her book *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, notes three elements in the formation of these groups: religious education, family ties, and a common geographical origin. In other words, with similar backgrounds, the members of these groups feel like they could trust each other.

Bertha Ferderber Salz, an orthodox Jewish woman from Poland, worked in a clothing factory in the Bergen-Belsen camp. She worked with seven other females; all had the common bond that they were separated from their families and missed them terribly. The quota for their group was sixty-four items of clothing, or eight items each. Each of the women tried to help out one woman who had heart disease, so that the group would make their quota. Ferderber Salz's niece, Sabina, became a close acquaintance of the women who worked in the kitchen in Bergen-Belsen. Sometimes they would give her some leftover food, which would hand over to her aunts who lived with her in the same block where food was not available.

- **Psychological Support and Sharing of Food:**

In the genre of holocaust literary criticism S. Lillian Kremer in her essay, *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*, opines "Holocaust narratives by women writers significantly extend literary representation and interpretation of the Shoah (means holocaust in Hebrew)." She supports this partly by showing gender based forms of suffering and responses to suffering in narratives by women. She includes female bonding and substitute families for psychological support and sharing of food in the camps. She cites evidence for the existence of such bonding by women survivors. Professor Kremer finds that women writers emphasize the themes of psychological support and sharing food as a strategy much more than male writers.

- **Mother-Daughter Relationship:**

Another survival strategy highlighted in these historical novels is that of the mother-daughter relationship, which a story of separation and reunion is sometimes. In Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, which is a short story a female camp inmate Rosa, witnesses a guard killing her toddler by throwing it at an electrified fence. Rosa is traumatized by this and it does not allow her to adapt well as a survivor after the war. She often fantasizes that her daughter is alive and writes letters to her. In several novels, older daughters write about their mothers who heroically sustained them until the mothers were selected for death. *Anya a novel* by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer deals with the mother- daughter relationship across three generations of one family.

- **Sex for Survival or Bartered Sex:**

Sex for survival or bartered sex was not uncommon, it is one of the survival strategies that was practiced and is often "linked to networks of power" and a strategy "to improve...material circumstances" (Hutton 107). A male survivor of the Lodz ghetto reported on prostitution for a piece of bread:

“for a slice of bread young girls would go into a yard or somewhere.

Possibly the mother was working, so the daughter would use the opportunity”

Nehama Tec, in non-judgmental language and tone, describes the sexual expectations of male partisans in return for protection. She further corroborates the assertion that women’s responses to

“sexual advances were motivated by the promise of food”

Undoubtedly, bartering sex for food was life saving though is looked upon as a degrading approach. Some stories discuss the larger issue of sex in the service of violence and survival during the Holocaust. Sexual compulsion, whether in the form of rape or bartered sex, was humiliation, degradation, and indignity that many Jewish women experienced. In Ida Fink’s collection of short stories, *A Scrap of Time*, the story, “Aryan Papers,” depicts a young girl bartering her virginity for false identity papers that might save her and her mother’s life.

- **Reversal of Conventional Gender Roles:**

War stories depict women as demoted to domestic space, while men go off to battle. Women are portrayed as passive, sometimes victimized, or rescued by men. Often, Holocaust writing by men relegate women to unreceptive or fringe roles. By contrast, in women’s Holocaust writing the war against the Jews is fought in the domestic space as homes are invaded and confiscated and the Jews displaced. Their memoirs depict women evolving ways to feed, protect or rescue their families. In harmony with social interactions and informal channels of information, women frequently become aware of danger before their husbands.

In ghettos, women who had never worked outside the home were forced to work for meagre pay or rations to sustain their children and husbands. In the gender segregated labour camps, women needed to rely on one another. The Holocaust fiction explores the dimensions of such role reversals.

An assumption that has emerged in scholarly interpretations of women’s Holocaust literature is the idea that women endured the hardships of concentration camps by forming surrogate families, bonding with and supporting one another, while men survived by competing with other men for scarce resources. While many works by women do give evidence of such cooperation, the differences may be less notable than supposed. This skill of reversal of gender roles acts as a strategy for survival.

Conclusion:-

Memoirs penned by survivors lead us to the conclusion that Jewish women used their normal skills and activities as coping survival strategies in the abnormal domain of the concentration camps. Women who had been raised to perform routine household and family chores used those experiences in a concentration camp setting where, if they did not fall victim to the pervasive random brutality and murder, these so called female skills helped them to survive. Moreover, Jewish women narratives reflect an awareness of the value of nurturing skills and the ability to connect as characteristics that were part of the routine socialization process for European women. Women and girls found that this socialization, which also included sewing and food preparation techniques, provided avenues for survival that were not usually available to men and boys. Males had far less experience in settings in which "female skills" were meaningful, or, in fact, customary. The "cliché of feminine passivity" does not, therefore, hold true for female Holocaust victims who were able to transfer familiar domestic values to a setting designed to accomplish mechanized mass murder and who, as actively as possible under the circumstances, managed to survive and helped each other to survive.

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