Writing To Heal: Transforming Memories of Trauma into a Testimony

Rasana A Lunia
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Veer Narmad South Gujarat University,
Cont. No. – 9574715971
Email Id. – rasnalunia17@gmail.com

Dr Dilber Mehta
Assistant Professor,
Research Supervisor,
Department of ICT,
Veer Narmad South Gujarat University,
Cont. No. – 9925247873
Email Id. – degulestan@vnsgu.ac.in

Abstract:

Holocaust survivors have long turned to memoir writing as a vital storytelling medium for processing profound trauma, transforming fragmented memories into coherent narratives that foster psychological healing. This paper examines how autobiographical storytelling enables survivors to confront, articulate, and integrate the unspeakable horrors of genocide, drawing on psychoanalytic frameworks such as Cathy Caruth's trauma theory which posits that trauma remains an "unclaimed experience," where the event overwhelms the victim at the moment it occurs, evading immediate conscious registration and returning later through repetitions or flashbacks. Storytelling relates to trauma processing by enabling the articulation of this fragmented, unspeakable memory, transforming silence into testimony that bridges the gap between the event and its recognition.

The study examines the memoir of one of the Holocaust survivors; Isabella Leitner which demonstrate narrative's therapeutic role by transforming survivors fragmented, overwhelming Holocaust memories into structured stories that reclaim humanity and foster emotional processing.

The Holocaust: Nazi Genocide of Six Million Jews and the Psychological Trauma-

The Holocaust was the systematic genocide of approximately six million European Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II from 1941- 1945. Nazi forces exterminated Jews primarily through mass shootings in Eastern Europe and gas chambers in extermination camps like Auschwitz- Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec and many more, wiping out about two-third of Europe’s Jewish population. Millions of others, including disabled people, political dissidents and the old aged were also targeted.

Holocaust survivors endured profound psychological trauma from extreme persecution, loss and starvation causing dehumanization among prisoners. Survivor’s writing, particularly the memoirs by many Holocaust survivors such as Dr Gisella Perl, Tova Friedman, or Isabella Leitner portray writing as a testimony against silence, yet reactivate distress through nightmares and flashbacks, transmitting unhealed wounds intergenerationally.

More than a catastrophic event of physical loss, the Holocaust deeply wounded the minds and souls of its survivors, leaving scars that transcended the immediate aftermath. Significantly, understanding this trauma requires attention to individual experiences, especially the gendered dimensions of suffering that women survivors, such as Isabella Leitner, uniquely reveal.

Several instances in Leitner's memoir constructs the argument in reflection to the psychological injuries Leitner suffered during the Holocaust and later witnesses in the form of flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts. In this regard, therefore, Cathy Caruth in her 'Trauma Theory' presented in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, rightly asserts; "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence." (Caruth 18). Thus, Cathy suggests that traumatic events happen and leave behind traces, and it cannot fully grasp as they occurred, they are only accessible to us through their inaccessibility; through the gaps, belated repercussions, silences, or symptoms they produce.

In this context, it can be asserted that, memoir of Leitner presents the delayed processing of Auschwitz experiences, such as, Dr. Mengele's selection procedures; the idea of 'survival of the fittest' and the immediate death of her mother and younger sister upon arrival at Auschwitz. The initial seperation caused traumatic rupture in Leitner's life marking not only the loss of her loved ones, yet, also the familial security. In this regard, therefore, it can be rightly asserted in the words of Patterson, as suggested by the researcher Carmelle Margaret Stephens in his research analysis; *The Holocaust and the Maternal Body: An Exploration of the Diverse Deployment of the Symbolic Maternal Body as a Discursive Trope in Holocaust Literature and its Impact on the Construction and Proliferation of Collective Memory*; as to put into the words of Patterson,

> "… to have a mother- is to be already marked for a mission:
> origin implies destiny, when that origin is seen as a mother
> and not as some primeval ooze. Situated at the origin of
> human sanctity, the mother represents not the primeval
> but the immemorial, the remembrance of something that
> transforms everything, prior to everything, and forever
> afterward into something meaningful" (Stephens 16).

Therefore, the loss of Leitner's mother created a sense of emptiness in her life. As a result, Leitner's recollections centre on her mother, who remained the emotional core of the family and her removal left a void that haunted Leitner throughout her imprisonment and long after liberation. As Leitner rightly claims;

> "My eyes turned skyward in search of a patch of sky,
> but all I could see was a kingdom of hell bathed in the
> darkest of swirling, charcoal gray smoke, and my nostrils

were saturated with the scent of burning flesh, and the scent
was that of my mother, my sister, …" (Leitner 10).

Psychoanalytically, Leitner's skyward gaze symbolizes a search for escape or hope, yet the physical and symbolic landscape of Auschwitz denies her this. 'The charcoal gray' and 'smoke' become internalized representations of chaos and destruction, leading to the feelings of helplessness and horror. Leitner's identification of the scent as belonging specifically to her mother and sister demonstrates how the traumatic extermination absorbed into the psyche, which is not felt immediately, yet persists into later life. Therefore, as the researcher, Muhammad Sohail Ahmad, Zainab Bukhari and et. al, rightly opines in regards to what Freud asserts in their research analysis titled; *No safe place for War Survivors: War memory, event exposure and migrants' psychological trauma,*

"Freud reiterates that people suffering from mental anxiety
are held captive by painful experiences from their distant
past. He characterizes the memory of trauma as "foreign
body which, long after its entry, must continue to be regarded
as an agent that is still at work" (Ahmad, Bukhari et. al 2).

Therefore, as Leitner writes, to argue in this context; "I have tried to rub the smoke out of my vision for decades, but my eyes are still burning, Mother" (Leitner 11). The psychological scars from the loss of maternal and sibling bonds at Auschwitz therefore reverberated throughout Isabella Leitner's life, colouring every aspect of her post- war existence. To mention one of her incidents in context to her post- war psychological impact of Auschwitz experiences is, she considered her first child as a triumph over Hitler's idea of eradicating the Jewish race. To highlight further, for instance, after delivering her first child and naming him Peter, meaning 'rock', she connects her son's birth with the strength and stability of her mother, even though physically she is no more, yet, she remains the foundational strength, the rock in her life. As she relates,

"Mama, Mama, I' m pregnant! Isn't that a miracle, Mama?
Isn't it incredible, Mama? …. Mama, we 've named him
Peter. You know how much I like that name. it translates into
stone, or rock. You were the rock, Mama. …. *Mama, You did*
not die!" (Leitner 60).

Leitner's declaration 'Mama, you did not die' reveals how the trauma of loss is tempered by her ability to credit new life and pass on her mother's memory. The direct emotional address to her mother highlights her longing, and unresolved grief. Therefore, as the

researcher Helen Swarna and Dr. R Karunambigai, rightly asserts in their research analysis titled, Unfinished Words and Silent Endings: Anne Frank's Diary Through the Lens of Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory,

> "It is impossible to process the sudden outbreak of the event and thus the psyche resituates it to process it for better clarity. Resolving the experience becomes uncertain due to fluctuation of memories and emotions" (Swarna and Karunambigai 172).

In reference to this statement, it can be asserted that, the imaginary conversation of Leitner with her mother shows the psyche's attempt to resituate traumatic experience. The suddenness of trauma makes direct processing impossible, so the survivor recreates the mother's presence in memory with fluctuating clarity and emotion. The repeated invocation 'Mama', mirrors the unstable recall and fluctuating emotional states.

Following the discussion further in context to the psychological injuries Leitner experienced during her survival journey in Auschwitz is her struggle for food; starvation. Starvation caused extreme physical weakness, making it difficult to carry out survival tasks, which in turn exacerbated feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. This physical depletion was accompanied by a deep psychological trauma. This can be evidently mention in regards to what Leitner submits in her narrations, to put in her words;

> "I curse you, even from the distance of these many years, for keeping me so hungry that it affected my brain and subordinated me to your evil. And my apologies to the animals for comparing you to them, because surely animals are more humane.

Thus, Leitner's recollections of Auschwitz's experiences addresses the enduring psychological trauma, as a result of experiencing extreme dehumanization. Leitner's rage, decades after the events, echoes Cathy Caruth's notion as also suggested by the critic Michelle Balev, in his book, *Trauma Studies;* Trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past" but only identified in "the way it is precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 17 4, Balev 364). Here, hunger induced by Leitner's perpetrators left not just physical yet, deeper psychological scars; resulting in continual distress when confronting these memories. Such experiences shattered identity and the survivor's fundamental understanding of humanity. Therefore, to say, comparing perpetrators to animals, as she writes "And my apologies to the animals for comparing you to them", elaborates trauma's power to disrupt basic concepts of human

morality and identity. Following this, as a result Leitner asserts that; “The German’s bible was death and humiliation and dehumanization, and they succeeded so well that they destroyed our ability to reason…” (Leitner 41).

Furthermore, to agree with what the researcher Sarah Ellen Snyder rightly posits; “this torturous trauma remains with the victims and in turn, survivors live with this trauma throughout their lives” and therefore, years later Leitner decodes her experiences of dehumanization; the German’s idea to lure hungry bellies with the aroma of boiled potatoes and drag them towards extermination. In this context, as to put in Leitner’s words;

“That time, that month, that day shames my soul now,
because I no longer am hungry and I can’t imagine how
I could have sold my freedom for the smell of
a potato” (Leitner 41).

Further Leitner also asserts;

“…. And so many decades later, it still hurts that the animals
in those spick- and span uniforms, in those shiny boots,
had the cunning to lure us back to destruction by rubbing our
noses in an aroma” (Leitner 41).

Expanding on our previous dialogue further, the memoir of Leitner also presents the brutal reality of hunger, that diminishes moral boundaries, even between family members. The camp’s atmosphere, with its designed scarcity and brutality, turns moral commitments into secondary concerns. Compared to the immediate need for food and survival, Leitner details instances where she had put her own survival ahead of supporting or consoling family members since the basic need to survive can make maintaining traditional bonds almost impossible to maintain. As Leitner articulates, “…. Cipi probably ran into the next house, or the one after that. She’s here somewhere and when it’s all safe, we ‘ll find her” (Leitner 45). In addition to this she further writes, “…. Then come on up and let’s eat, before the Germans comes back to kill us. Let’s eat” (Leitner 45).

The passage reveals, that eating is prioritized over searching for Cipi or thinking about the Germans’ imminent threat; hunger does not just co- exist with fear of death – it over shadows it. Psychologically, to say, Leitner’s statement reveals that, hunger overrides the obligations towards loved ones, despite the sister’s concern for Cipi, their assurance that “she’s here somewhere” justifies their attention being diverted from moral obligations in favor of survival.

In addition to Cathy's idea of 'trauma theory', she further asserts that, "language'; reading preserves the trauma through literary stories. The victims always desire to speak out about the traumatic experience and losses" (Ahmad Kanwal and et. al 4). This could be elaborated from the passage Leitner contributes; "To get some relief, I needed to talk. But to whom? .... Naïve questions only increased my frustration. Yet, I had to talk. I just had to" (Leitner 15). Subsequently, Leitner also justifies; how significant is to articulate her trauma. As she posits;

> "I began to "speak" on little scraps of paper in my native tongue, Hungary…. When the images of Auschwitz forced themselves to the threshold of my memory, I would write wherever I happened to be – on the bus, in the Kitchen, in the bathroom, in the owlish hours of night…."
>
> (Leitner 15).

The above passage reveals Leitner's post-war psychological trauma, where the choice to write out these memories in private, and then to frequently discard them, shows both the overwhelming urge to release traumatic memories, and the difficulty in integrating them into personal or social narrative. However, as the aspect of Cathy Caruth's 'trauma theory' rightly argues; trauma resists full linguistic articulation; it "surpasses conventional human comprehension" (Kadian e741), yet Leitner's compulsion to write, even in fleeting, private moments, underscores the need to bear witness to her trauma. Leitner's narrative process becomes a cycle of temporary relief.

However, struggling to process her trauma, Leitner's post war years were marked by resilience and renewal. Marked with, in 1956, she tied knot with Irving A Leitner, a U.S Air force Veteran and together they nurtured two sons, Peter and Richard, whom she considered as her "greatest victory over Hitler", as she addresses her mother saying, "Peter has started the birth of the new six million…. We have another son, …. We have named him Richard…. He is the voice of Six million" (Leitner 60-61).

Leitner settled in New York, where despite enduring constant psychological scars of her past, she remained committed to herself in recounting the Holocaust's reality, considering it as her duty for those who could not survive. As she agrees;

> "…. I would discard the memories in the trash- until one day,
> When a mysterious sense of history silently whispered in my heart to save them, to try to leave a piece of my soul behind,
> for whatever the future might be" (Leitner 16).

Henceforth, narrating trauma, unfold spoken truths and to justify in the words of Schaffer and Smith, these written stories; trauma writings invite an ethical response from its readers. To put it in their words;

> "Some stories, formerly locked in silence, open wounds and re-trigger traumatic feelings once they are told. Some stories, recounted in the face of oppression and repression, of shame and denial, reinvest the past with a new intensity, often with pathos, as they test normative conceptions of social reality. All stories invite an ethical response from listeners and readers" (Schaffer and Smith 4).

Therefore, until she died in 2009, Leitner remained a firm witness to the Holocaust; her writings preserved the memory of those lost.

Conclusion:

In line with Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma's delayed accessibility, Isabella Leitner's memoir demonstrates how Holocaust survivors use narrative to transform their terrible memories into potent testimonies. Writing turns into a therapeutic activity that promotes resilience and intergenerational witness while recovering fractured memories of starvation, grief, and dehumanization. In the end, Leitner's tale highlights the function of memoir in transforming silence into moral testimony, guaranteeing that the Holocaust's wounds persist as appeals for compassion and remembrance.

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