



Appropriating and Inheriting Trauma: A Second-Generation Holocaust Survivors' Perspective in Helen Epstein's *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*

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Abstract— *The Holocaust terrors perpetuated pain across generations as the second generation victims were traumatized by their parents' sufferings under the Nazi occupation. The memories of the Holocaust pervaded in the domestic spheres of the victims, triggering emotional outbursts and affected personal temperament. The memories inherited by the generational victims haunted their psychic spheres, resulting in abnormal personality and affected interpersonal and social relationships. The descendants encountered troubles in their domestic spaces as their tormented parents overburdened them to act as emotional shield to counter the continued agonies. The Holocaust memoir, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*, recorded the Holocaust horrors agonizing the second generation victims, induced by the inherited memory accounts of the Holocaust horrors.*



Keywords— *Holocaust trauma, Inheritance of memories, Generational torments*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Holocaust horrors traumatized the Jewish survivors in the aftermath of the catastrophe, resultant of the frequent haunting triggered by the latent play of the horrifying memories persisting throughout the lifetime of the victims. The Jewish horror transmitted the torments to the descendants of the survivors, perpetuating the pain to the generational victims since they inherited the memories and the pain triggered by the acquired memories. The second generation victims recognized the presence of mysterious pain and troubles hovering in their families during their childhood and they actively engaged to acquire the repressed accounts triggering the troubles. Some of the descendants acquired the memories from their parents through explicit communication while others acquired the memories by pressurizing the survivors to

articulate the horrors. The acquired memories victimized the second generation descendants in multiple dimensions including being subjected to continued psychic haunting resulting in marred personal attitude, troubled by witnessing their parents' agonies, and burdened by the nebulous void produced by the uncommunicated or partially communicated memories of their parents' sufferings. The second generation victims exhibited intense inclination to experience sufferings personally as a psychic reaction to identify themselves with the torments of their parents and they intended to travel back to the sites of the Holocaust horrors and the native places of their parents as they engaged to assimilate into the Jewish domain. Alan L. Berger and Naomi Berger presented the second generation legacy as,

The legacy of the Holocaust is present in a variety of ways for the second generation, issues of the intergenerational communication, parental enmeshment, and separation concerns. This legacy also undergirds their identity, their sensitivity to multicultural issues, and their concern for social justice. (Berger 1)

II. THE PERSISTENCE OF HOLOCAUST TRAUMA

This article attempts to explore the trauma experienced by the second generation victims through the Holocaust memoir, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (1988), written by Helen Epstein. The memoir presents the second generation perspective on Holocaust horrors by recording the numerous personal accounts of the second generation victims and it traces the Holocaust horrors conducting its terrorizing impression to the descendants and their approach towards the excruciating Jewish terrors. Any incident marked with terrorizing outcome is capable of triggering pain and psychic stress to the victims in the aftermath. The Holocaust tormented the Jewish victims during the course of the catastrophe and in the aftermath. It inflicted numerous brutal abuses to the victims during the Nazi occupation including stripping their human essence and subduing them to subhuman status, the evils of concentration camps and the mass annihilation resulted in the murder of one third of European Jews. In the post Holocaust period, the victims were haunted by the resurfacing images of the horrors affecting their psychic performance and thereby ruining the normalcy of the victims' domestic spaces. The prolonged torments triggering intense pain and marred psychic performance in the aftermath of the terrorizing event were the indications of continued Holocaust trauma. The traumatic event inducing the torments in the aftermath is pathologically defined as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Cathy Caruth defined PTSD as,

There is as a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (Caruth 4)

The traumatized Holocaust victims were distressed by the frequent appearance of the images pertaining to the horrifying incidents of the past. The Holocaust horrors affected the victims in the aftermath as they were anguished by the latent presence of the horrors leading to

emotional outbursts and anger issues. Their sleeps were troubled by the nightmares as they were waking from their sleeps, crying and screaming the names of the Nazi perpetrators and they also developed pessimistic attitude of anticipating possible negative outcomes for any event. The realm of Holocaust horrors retained immense anguish and distress which insisted the victims to restrain the active engagement with Holocaust memories as psychic reaction to shield their vulnerability. The survivors inhibited the active and explicit communication of the memories due to the pain generated by the free articulation of the Holocaust horrors. Laura. S. Brown stated the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as,

reexperiencing symptoms, nightmares, and flashbacks; avoidance symptoms, the marks of psychic numbing; and the symptoms of heightened physiological arousal: hypervigilance, disturbed sleep, a distracted mind. (Brown 100)

III. HOLOCAUST HORRORS INHERITED BY GENERATIONAL VICTIMS

The Holocaust horrors tormented the survivors which resulted in troubled relationship in the familial spheres, and thereby transmitting the anguish to the second generation victims. The victims were shattered in the aftermath of the Holocaust as most of the family members were murdered in the Nazi execution, deprived of land to live, confronting the personal identity marred due to the inhuman treatment afflicted. The survivors in the aftermath inclined to establish new families as a moral responsibility to revitalize the shattered Jewish community and to compensate the mass annihilation. The progeny of the Holocaust survivor was symbolized as the "new leaf" (Epstein 13), ascribed of hope and reassurance and signified as, "the leaf was as different from death as good was from evil and the present from the past" (Epstein 13). As the children of the survivors were regarded as the sprouts emerging out from the burnt out Jewish tree, they were overprotected and overburdened to counter the Jewish ruins. The descendants encountered the condition of playing as the protection shield to safeguard the vulnerability of the victims and to compensate the miseries suffered by their parents.

The families of the Holocaust victims displayed the marks of turbulence caused by the latent presence of the Holocaust trauma and their domestic spaces were permeated by the persisting agonies, unnatural fear, pessimistic attitude, underlying mystery, emotional outbursts, troubled inter personal relationships, and the demand for the close affinity in the family to shield against the Holocaust sufferings. The article, "Family Approach

with Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors" traced the conditions of the Holocaust survivors as, they were "described as presenting high levels of emotional disorders, psychological symptoms, posttraumatic symptoms, and an achievement motivation based on the fear of failure" (Fossion 519). The Holocaust trauma affected the descendants with intense degree of anguish resulting in transformation of descendants of the Holocaust survivors to the second generation victims and affixing the Holocaust barbarity into their personal identification to their Jewishness. The Holocaust horrors haunting the survivors affected their attitude towards their children which resulted in imparting undefinable fear and scepticism to the descendants. "The wounded descendant is said to be a product of defective parenting, which is in turn a product of Holocaust" (Kidron 533). The second generation victims were distressed by their parents' terrifying encounters of the past, which ruined the normality of their domestic conditions. Unlike the regular domestic affairs, the descendants of the Holocaust survivors encountered tumultuous temperament pervading in their families due to the memories haunting the survivors as it was described as, "high level of anxiety and depression results in major difficulties in providing an adequate maturational environment for their children" (Fossion 520).

The survivors displayed the collective attitude of forming close affinity with the family members as a consequential effect of the ruptures engendered by the Holocaust and the excessive affinity was developed to counter the emotional distress induced by the Holocaust trauma. The descendants reciprocated with close bonding in order to shield their vulnerable parents against the emotional damage caused by the Nazi affliction and the affinity also suppressed the normal functioning of their personal spirit by preferring the parents' interests over the personal inclination. Though the intimacy appeared as the emotional shield reinforcing the familial bonding, it was the result of the devastated psychic space of the victims insisting them to develop mutual overattachment in the family. The expected excessive closeness in the familial sphere had subdued the individual significance of the second generation victims. It was mentioned as "closeness, like protectiveness, is not always a positive characteristic, it may be very negative and need not imply warmth" (Kidron 523).

Helen Epstein was affected by her parents' agonies impacting her psychic space, which she mentioned as, "for years it lay in an iron box buried so deep inside me that I was never sure just what it was" (Epstein 9). The torments of Holocaust prevailed in indiscernible structure, operating latently, induced anguish and anxiety in the second

generation victims. Helen Epstein recorded the Holocaust horrors resurfacing the psychic space during the quiet times of the day with the images of the Holocaust crimes portraying the "blood and shattered glass" (Epstein 9), "piles of skeletons and blackened barbed wire with bits of flesh stuck to it the way flies stick to walls after they are swatted dead" (Epstein 9), "hills of suitcases, mountains of children's shoes," and "whips, pistols, boots, knives and needles" (Epstein 9). "Though she had not encountered the horrors personally, the haunting was transferred to her psychic sphere as the torments generated by the Holocaust memories were inherited from her parents. She was subjected to indiscernible anxiety during her childhood, triggered by the acquired traumatic memories of the Holocaust, which she recorded as,

Burglars and murderers might enter our apartment at any time and catch us unprepared. I made my brother lieutenant and marched him off to the kitchen to be armed. I chose a potato masher, wooden spoons and two long knives from the drawer, and we stood vigil by the door until the scare paled or I was too tired to stand guard anymore. (Epstein 10)

Helen Epstein displaying the attitude of abnormal vigilance to counter the unknown opponents, delusions of being attacked by unknown enemies were explicit reflection of the Jewish torments executed by the Nazis in the grounds of false accusations and the Jewish plight of helplessness in the Nazi regime.

Rochelle, daughter of Holocaust survivors, was troubled by incomprehensible burden distressing her and she treated the unarticulated haunting with art therapy. The art therapy supported her to foreground the repressed and concealed anguishing memories performing in the inner surface of the psyche. Rochelle's painting rendition explicated the underlying impact of the frightful Holocaust images consisting, "one big symbol" (Epstein 44), painted in "two feet by one and a half. It was mostly black and red. Blood and barbed wire. There was one little yellow star of David in it. Ghostly figures" (Epstein 44). The memories of the Jewish agonies troubled her psychic space and the images of the Nazi atrocities reflected the latent haunting triggered by the Holocaust trauma.

Deborah, the second generation victim to the Holocaust trauma, recorded that she was troubled by the "nightmares of men chasing her and her family" (Epstein 305). The morbid fear of being hunted by the unknown enemies, the murder and death of family members executed by those enemies, operated in the subconscious space, streamed and articulated as nightmares. She also experienced the illogical fear of enemies attacking her, from which she protected her home by "lining up glass

bottles in a row before the front door- an early warning system that would allow her time to escape” (Epstein 305).

The Holocaust memories formed a potent tormenting base into the personal psychic structure of the second generation victims which reflected in their attitude of developing morbid anxiety, being affected by resurfacing images of the Jewish sufferings, and excessively vigilant to attack the unknown enemies. These were the indication marks which confirmed the performance of Holocaust trauma, operating in the subconscious sphere of the second generation victims. The torments induced by the Holocaust trauma reflected the Jewish predicament under the Nazi occupation, the Jewish community segregated and identified with Star of David, the Jewish victims incarcerated in the concentration camps, the helpless condition of Jewish victims who were reduced to subhumans and incapable of counter attacking the perpetrators, the physical violence, and the Final Solution which aimed at the mass persecution of Jewish victims.

Robert Eli Rubinstein, a second generation victim, was anguished by the Holocaust trauma, which he acquired from his parents and, he recorded that his familial space appeared mysterious, exhibiting the underlying tension associated with the families of the Holocaust survivors in the aftermath. Though the horrors about the Holocaust sufferings were not communicated in the families of the survivors in an explicit manner due to the immense pain and agonies associated with the plighting memories, the Holocaust tended to traumatize the Jewish victims through its latent presence.

“I always had a feeling of something different in our house,” Eli said, “but I couldn’t ever really pin it down. I sensed there was something mysterious, something peculiar about the past, about the place where I was born but I didn’t know what. (Epstein 24)

He also noted that his father remained opaque towards communicating the terrors of the Jewish sufferings, whereas his mother revealed the repressed past impressions of the Jewish plight perpetrated by the Nazis. Eli was tormented to witness his mother being victimized to the haunting memories of the Holocaust, which in succession transmitted to his psychic space and agonized him. Eli inherited the agonies of his mother’s trauma into his personal memory structure, which facilitated the temporal passage of the traumatic memories of Holocaust to the next generation.

It was very painful to listen to. These were things that had happened to my mother and who’s close to me than my mother? Sometimes I cried but I was embarrassed to have her see me doing that. I certainly

didn’t want to hurt my mother further by upsetting her. (Epstein 26)

The second generation victims were “trapped within the symbiotic relationship with their parents, essentially unable to separate and individuate completely” (Kidron 530). Joseph, a descendant of Holocaust survivors, was victimized by the Holocaust trauma. He established an intimate and faithful bonding with his parents and siblings as he regarded “family was the first loyalty: it was always in our house” (Epstein 182). His course of life was centred on his parents’ dominion including choosing his living place near his parents’ home, his parent’s selection of the furniture in his home, his personal preference towards engaging in relationship with woman matching his family’s distress, his frequent telephonic conversations with the family members, and his responsible attitude towards his siblings.

His loyalty to family appeared extreme to Joseph’s friends. He lived in a neighbourhood his parents had chosen for him. His mother had chosen his furniture. He was readily available to his older sister’s family as driver, confidant or babysitter (Epstein 178).

The descendants shared a serious relationship with their parents, as Rochelle recorded that unlike the kinship shared among the regular families, the affinity formed in the domestic spheres of the Holocaust victims was marked with extreme care and sincerity. The trauma haunting the survivors demanded the utmost care and protection to be exhibited from the second generation descendants. Fossion presented the emotional attachment as, “CHSs were a source of reassurance and confirmation of survival. They were submitted to role reversal, becoming parents to their own parents, and to an intense emotional overinvestment” (Fossion 522). Rochelle’s parents were vulnerable, requiring careful approach and intense affection, and she was troubled to fulfil her parents’ demand to remain intact to the domestic sphere. The Holocaust had imprinted the survivors with a terrible mark of ineradicable horror which induced the gloomy conditions prevailing in their familial spaces. Unlike her brother, who exhibited intensive loyalty towards their parents, she was burdened by the strong bonding which required the role reversal between her and her parents which she mentioned as, “it was not as if they were parents and we were the children. We became the parents sometimes and I didn’t like that” (Epstein 37). The close bonding formed in the familial spheres were intended to act as protective shield against the haunting memories of the Holocaust, which subdued the personal scope of the second generation victims and burdening them to fit into the frame of “good son or good daughter” (Fossion 522).

The Holocaust trauma haunted the survivors through frequent appearance for the entirety of their lifetime and it extended its distressing dominion over the second generation victims, as they inherited the trauma from their ailing parents. The descendants of the Holocaust survivors exhibited unnatural inclination to experience the suffering which their parents had encountered during the Nazi occupation. Helen Epstein recorded that she had fervent inclination to experience the impression of hardships and pains as an approach to integrate into the realm of her parents' agonies. She mentioned that "I dreamed of finding ways to suffer, to confront, feel and vanquish pain" (Epstein 255). She determined to move from her sophisticated livelihood in Canada to Israel which could be regarded as the prominent shift to encounter the Jewish agonies personally, so as to merge with the sufferings of her parents and acquire her Jewish identity. Against her parents' refusal, she moved to Israel and assimilated into the Jewish spheres which facilitated to ingrain the Jewishness into her personal spaces. The second generation approach towards the identification with Jewish sufferings was described as, "the child, longing for unfamiliar figures and chapters in the survivors' life, imagines him or herself to have actually been with their parents in their war experiences" (Kidron 518). The descendants' attitude to experience the sufferings to equalize the Holocaust horrors endured by their parents was the psychological effect triggered by the acquired Holocaust trauma merging into the personal spheres of the second generation victims.

IV. HOLOCAUST TRAUMA AND THE JEWISH IDENTITY

The second generation victims inclined to incorporate the Holocaust trauma and torments into their personal framework of identity construction. The descendants endeavoured to merge into the Jewish realm by attempting to own the torments of the Holocaust. The descendants exhibited the curiosity for travelling back to the European countries where their parents encountered the Nazi atrocities and visiting the homeland established in Israel. Helen Epstein travelled to Israel and she lived there for three years, which she mentioned as, "In Israel, it seemed, all the troublesome questions of Jewish identity were resolved" (266). She integrated into the social and cultural spheres of the Israel yielding her enthusiasm which she recorded as, "Jews were normal in Israel" (266) She mingled into the social sphere of the nation which provided her the required sense of Jewishness which filled the void in her personal identity. Robert Eli Rubinstein travelled back to Hungary, where his parents lived during the prewar times. Despite his parents' disapproval, he

undertook his journey to his father's hometown in Hungary. His parents were worried by his inclination to travel back to Hungary, one of the European countries which doomed the Jewish community with mass destruction which Epstein mentioned as, "they couldn't understand what would drive their son, who had been born outside, to go back" (30). Eli visited the town, where he experienced mixture of reactions from the native citizens as some of them were "excited" (30), and "nervous" (30), and his visit to the hometown induced rage against the Nazis, which subdued his human attitude and transformed him to a violent person fantasizing to "torture and mutilate" (31) the Nazi perpetrators.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite the times of Holocaust had receded, the traumatic memories of the Jewish torments continued its haunting due to its gruelling magnitude. The Holocaust horrors continued its haunting to the second generation as the memories and torments generated by the Nazi affliction were inherited by the descendants. The second generation victims collectively inherited the Holocaust trauma as they sensed the underlying troubles generated by the Holocaust horrors, haunting and altering the familial engagement and their psychic performance was altered by the transferred Holocaust trauma triggering unnatural fears and pessimistic attitude. The Holocaust victims exhibited the signs of torments as they were affected by the frequent resurfacing of the memories causing emotional troubles, distrust in social relationships, and affected personal temperament. They also developed the moral responsibility to establish closely bonded families to confirm the continuation of the Jewish flow and thereby passed the Holocaust trauma to the second generation in both conscious and unintentional manner. The generational victims were burdened by their parents' demand to form close affinity in the families and to act as substitute members for the dead relatives and, the void caused by the uncommunicated memories concealing the torments enduring the Nazi atrocities. The Holocaust horrors were immensely horrifying and intense, capable of transmitting and incorporating the torments to the generational flow of the Jewish community.

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