

Reliving the Holocaust Trauma With Reference to William Styron's 'Sophie's Choice'

Abstract

Sophie's Choice depicts not just the wartime mayhem but also the post traumatic stress of the survivors. Styron gives voice to the pain of Sophie and her life after the Holocaust. Sophie created new life for herself but part of her personality still lives in a concentration camp. There are moments when she tries to escape from talking about her past and she constantly strives to overcome the trauma. Guilt plays a major role in aggravating the trauma of Sophie. She considers her misfortunes as an outcome of the wrong decisions she took in the past. Her grief and trauma come to an end when she finally commits suicide.

Keywords: Holocaust, Concentration Camp, Survivor, Post Traumatic Stress, Guilt, Suicide

Introduction

To expose to the world, the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust survivors, and its everlasting impact on their psychology. This discussion is based on William Styron's novel, *Sophie's Choice*. Styron.

Aim of the Study

The paper intends to show how a survivor like Sophie fails to establish a normal life for herself and always lives as a prisoner of the past. The paper attempts to throw light on the fact that some traumatized people are preoccupied with the trauma and continue recreate it throughout their lives. It also explores the human capacity for inflicting evil and the ability to resist it.

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Since the Second World War, the traumatic experiences of the survivors of the Holocaust, has been one of the most discussed and focused upon issues in literary circles. Holocaust is commonly described as appalling, disturbing and traumatic. The term 'Holocaust' mainly talks about the Nazi terror which led to the extermination of several groups, especially the Jews. 'Holocaust Literature' is a term that has been used for that particular genre of literature which includes a variety of texts, documenting the horrifying nightmare experienced by the Jews due to anti-Semitic views of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers' Party, commonly known as the Nazi party.

One such powerful representation of the Holocaust is William Styron's poignant novel, *Sophie's Choice* (1979). It engages the reader's attention with its depiction of not just the wartime mayhem but also the post traumatic stress of the survivors. It suggests that oppression induced by the Third Reich was a source of evil which evolved from the institution of slavery. As the novel opens, the reader is introduced to the narrator of the story, a Southern writer, named Stingo who takes us thirty years back to the summer of 1947. Moving to a lodge in Brooklyn, Stingo befriends a beautiful Polish woman, Sophie Zawadowska, and her Jewish lover, Nathan Landau. As Stingo is drawn into the heart of their relationship as a confidant and witness, he gradually learns about the traumatic past experience of Sophie while she lived as a captive in Auschwitz for twenty months. Through Stingo, Styron gives voice to the pain of Sophie and her life after the war. Choosing a Polish Catholic survivor of the Nazi concentration camp as the protagonist of the novel, Styron reminds us that the victims of the Holocaust were not just the Jews but also Catholic Poles, Romani, Soviet civilians, etc. Asserting his decision of choosing a gentile to be his representative Holocaust victim, he says, "Although she was not Jewish, she had suffered as much as any Jew who had survived the same



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afflictions, and – as I think will be made plain – had in certain profound ways suffered more than most” (Styron 264).

After the liberation of German concentration camps, there were survivors suffering from depression who were not able to return to life they lived before the war and Sophie is shown to be one such survivor. The traumatic event finished in the outer world, but not in her inner world. Styron reveals the bitter truth of the life of the Holocaust survivor that represents a mixture of present and past – life in a concentration camp and life in new safe conditions. Although Sophie created new life for herself, part of her personality still lives in a concentration camp.

Despite the violent arguments Sophie has with Nathan, her life seems to run quite normally. However, under the surface, the sense of guilt and depression haunts Sophie that can be seen in the form of her excessive drinking and her anxiety filled confessions to Stingo. Through her Holocaust testimony, Stingo arrives at the dark core of Sophie’s past: her memories of pre-war Poland, the concentration camp and her terrifying secret. She had suffered since her childhood days because of the oppressive behavior of her father, Professor Zbugniew Biegansk who was a strong supporter of the Nazis and whose teachings were mainly anti-Semitic. The narrator says, “This was the constant, overwhelming reality of her father, a man who had exercised over his household, and especially Sophie, a tyrannical domination so inflexible yet so cunningly subtle that she was a grown woman, fully coming of age, before she realized that she loathed him past all telling” (Styron 288). Although Sophie wanted to rebel against her father’s demeaning attitude towards her and his anti-Semitic views, she was too afraid of going against him. Not only was she married to a follower of her father, a man named Kazik, she was compelled to type her father’s speeches publicizing his anti-Semitism and to circulate his pamphlets. Sophie eventually started hating his father as she herself confesses to Stingo, “I said to myself: *I hate him*- with a kind of terrible wonder at the hatred which entered into me. It was incredible, the surprise of this hatred, only with awful pain- like a butcher knife in my heart” (Styron 299). Despite their Nazi loyalties, Sophie’s father and Kazik were shot by the occupying German regime for being Polish intellectuals. Eventually Sophie is arrested and sent, along with her two children, a boy and a girl, to Auschwitz when she is caught with meat—food rations illegal for Poles and reserved for the German occupiers—hidden under her coat.

As she reaches Auschwitz, she is asked to make a choice that no parent would ever want to make, a choice worse than death. When she is threatened that both her children would be sent the gas chambers if she doesn’t choose which one of her kids will live and which one will die, Sophie chooses to save her son, Jan; and her daughter, Eva is sent straight away to the gas chambers. She makes this choice as she figures that Jan would have a better chance of surviving the camp. After she is separated from Jan, Sophie never gets a chance to see him.

However later, when she gets a letter saying that Jan had been moved from the children’s camp, she assumes that he was killed. Sophie lives with tremendous guilt ever since she arrived at Auschwitz. She suffers during her captivity not only from starvation but also emotional degradation. Although in Auschwitz, through a combination of skill and luck, Sophie manages to get work in the Commandant’s mansion, she becomes a living witness to man’s inhumanity; not merely a witness but a victim to it as well.

Styron clearly illustrates how people try to save themselves by hook or by crook in such a difficult situation. The will to escape the vortex of evil, forces them go up to any extent. For her survival, Sophie, too, lies, steals and cooperates with the Nazis. *Sophie’s Choice* highlights the human tendency to benefit or advance at the cost of other people’s wellbeing. Sophie refuses to rebel against the Nazis and be a part of the underground movement. She puts on an anti-Semitic attitude in front of Hoss. She exploits Nazi racism and tries to prove that her children are racially pure. Her very survival is based upon her cooperation with the enemy, and the guilt and terror that remain as the legacy of such involvement necessarily lead to her self-destruction.

Throughout the novel, there are several instances which show that thought Sophie survives the Holocaust yet she remains a prisoner of her horrifying past. She suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, an anxiety disorder which had resulted from her sufferings and overpowering guilt. She struggles to recover from her traumatic experience while still suffering from it. There are moments when she tries to escape from talking about her past. Her way of storytelling is one of the strongest proofs that she has still not made peace with her past life. It can be said that she tries to conceal the whole truth and tries to lie because of her sense of guilt and the pain it causes her every day.

Now we understand that Sophie’s choice includes not only whether at any moment to narrate the truth as she knows it, but also how much of the truth to narrate. Yet she is not in control of her telling, and her own trauma shapes not only her efforts to recapture the truth and concomitant repression and sublimation, but also her conscious lies and evasions. (Schwarz 201)

Furthermore, she feels a need to reveal and to avoid her past, simultaneously. She is willing to share her experiences with Stingo but at the same time, she describes them elusively. For example, while talking about her arrival to Auschwitz, she skips that part of the story where she is asked to make the terrible choice. She stammers as she describes the scene:

When I come of the train I was selected not to go to...to...not to Birkenau and the...’ To Sophie’s chargin, she felt the thin outer layer of her cool façade begin to shiver

and crack, and her composure faltered; she was aware of a quirky quaver in her voice. She was stammering. But she quickly gained control of herself. (Styron 174)

Sophie constantly strives to overcome the trauma. In order to regain her peace, she turns to music. At a concert of classical music she "felt a serenity, a sense of inner solace that amazed her, along with the awareness that there were things to live for, and that she might actually be able to reclaim the scattered pieces of her life and compose of them a new self, given half the chance" (Styron 104). On the other hand, music makes her cry as many compositions bring back the memory of the time she spent at Warsaw and Krakow. She says, "Often I cry alone when I listen to music, which reminds me of Cracow and those years past. And you know, there is one piece of music that I cannot listen to, it makes me cry so much my nose stops up, I cannot breathe, my eyes run like streams" (Styron 80). In order to recover from her anguish, she tries to find solace by drinking excessively.

Sophie tries to numb herself by being a part of a masochistic relationship. Nathan who walked into her life as a savior when she fainted in a library, later on turns out to be a paranoid schizophrenic. He pretends to be a Jewish intellectual but in reality can be called a maniac who moves from normal human behavior to fits of madness. Out of jealousy, Nathan often abuses and even beats Sophie. "Her lover Nathan is mentally ill, suffering from a severe form of manic-depressive schizophrenia that he often pushes to the limit with drugs. Although on one level Nathan expresses deep love for Sophie, he brutalizes her physically and verbally during the extreme phases of his illness" (Nemeth 100). The fact that Sophie survived while so many Jews did not, aggravates Nathan's rage when he has his psychotic fits; Sophie's own sense of guilt at her survival makes her defenseless to Nathan's frenzy and binds her to him despite the mistreatment and abuse she receives from his end. It is because of her guilt ridden consciousness that she considers the misconduct of Nathan towards her as a punishment for her sins. Despite its violent and destructive nature, Sophie considers her relationship as a consolation, as a way to forget her past. As Nakari states, it helps her to "withdraw from her traumatized, troubled mind – and more importantly [...] forget her all-consuming guilt" (29). She is not willing to lose Nathan just like she lost her family and her children. She tells Stingo:

Don't ask me, Stingo, don't ask me why—after all this— I was still ready for Nathan to piss on me, rape me, stab me, beat me, blind me, do anything with me that he desired. Anyway, a long time passed before he spoke to me again. Then he said, "Sophie love, I'm insane, you know. I want to apologize for my insanity." And I we made love all afternoon, which made me forget the pain but forget God too, and Jan, and all the other things I had lost.

And I knew Nathan and me would live for a while more together. (Styron 422)

Shortly before Sophie met Nathan she had been raped in the subway which is termed by Styron as 'digital rape'. The traumatic effect of this event where she was touched inappropriately by a stranger is devastating as it shatters her hope of starting a fresh new life. This incident brings back shame, inhumanity, and cruelty in her life, thus, making her realize that the suffering will never end. Styron reflects:

But now her distress was compounded by the way it upset the fragile balance of her newly renovated psyche, by the manner in which this looting of her soul (for she felt it to be that as much as her body) not only pushed her back toward the cauchemar, the nightmare from which she was ever so delicately and slowly trying to retreat, but actually symbolized, in its wanton viciousness, the very nature of that nightmare world. (110)

Guilt plays a major role in aggravating the trauma of Sophie. Stingo says "... but the word 'guilt', I discovered that summer, was often dominant in her vocabulary, and it is now clear to me that a hideous sense of guilt always chiefly governed reassessments she was forced to make of her past. I also came to see that she tended to view her own recent history through a filter of self-loathing..." (Styron 89). She is blind to her own victimization as she does not see herself as a victim of the brutal circumstances. Instead the survivor's guilt and the guilt of her past moral failings lead to anguish. She considers her misfortunes as an outcome of the wrong decisions she took in the past, like her failure to help the Resistance, her decision of saving her son while sending her daughter to the gas chambers, etc. Rather, she calls herself an 'accomplice' for helping her anti-Semitic father, for her closeness with Hoss, and for not resisting the Nazis. The fact that she actually used her father's pamphlet as a means to save herself and her son, trying to convince Hoss that she belongs to the people who can't stand the Jewish race and are supporters of the Nazis, is the most upsetting of all guilt.

If Sophie has just been a victim—helpless as a blown leaf, a human speck, volitionless, like so many multitudes of her fellow damned -- she would have seemed merely pathetic ... And therein lay one (although not the only one) of the prime causes of her devastating guilt ... For she could not wriggle out from beneath the suffocating knowledge that there had been this time in her life when she had played out the role, to its limit, of a fellow conspirator in crime. And this was the role of an obsessed and poisonous anti-Semite – a

passionate, avid, tediously single-minded hater of Jews. (Styron 265)

Therefore, we can say that Sophie survived the concentration camp but she failed to survive the inner guilt. She is absolutely destroyed by the burden of her guilt combined with the terrible penance that she inflicts upon herself through her ruinous relationship with Nathan. Even Nathan's abuse of her body, mind and soul cannot absolve her of the remorse of making the ghastly choice she was forced to make. Her grief and tormenting guilt come to an end when she finally commits suicide along with Nathan by consuming cyanide. Therefore, it can be said that William Styron paints a completely broken and unstable survivor of the Holocaust who tries to escape her feeling of guilt by taking refuge in all sorts of possible violence. However, as everything fails to compensate for her troublesome past, she ultimately brings an end to her trauma by finding escape in death.

Review of Literature

The literature review reveals that William Styron has attracted the attention of many researchers and critics and a considerable body of research has been done on the novel but from other literary aspects. Most of the researches are focused primarily on the depiction of the novel as a Holocaust fiction, dealing with the topic of anti-Semitism. For instance, Krupa in her research paper, *Styron's Novel 'Sophie's Choice' as a Holocaust Fiction* (2017), talks about several elements of the Holocaust in the novel. Similarly, Jennifer Wilber in her research paper, *Loss of Innocence in Sophie's Choice* (2017), aims to reveal that the greatest loss of innocence, among all the losses that she incurred, happened when Sophie was forced to make the impossible choice. P. Saraswathi in her study, *Sin, Remorse and Expiation in the Select Novels of William Styron* (2015), refers to the causes that comprise the rebellion and isolation of individuals like Sophie.

Another researcher, Michael Lackey in his research, *Nazi Children, Christian Anti-Semitism, and the New Atheist in William Styron's Sophie's Choice*, published in 2014, discusses Nazi's theory of exterminating the Jews and he, further, talks about the emergence of Sophie as a new atheist when she realizes that Christianity encouraged the Nazis to go ahead with their anti-Semitism.

This paper entitled, *Reliving the Holocaust Trauma with reference to William Styron's Sophie's Choice*, marks a point of departure from the above mentioned seminal research contributions in the study of Sophie's Choice as it analyses the everlasting traumatic and psychological effects of the Holocaust. It further highlights the survivor's fight against the

post-traumatic stress. Thus, this research paper attempts to contribute significantly and expand the dimensions of literary research.

Conclusion

The Holocaust is depicted by the novelist as the greatest human tragedy. Through the novel, William Styron displays not only how evil is at the center of humanity but also how our future depends on our willingness to either curb it by rebelling against it or empower it through indifference. The story of Sophie exhibits the suffering of all those people who encounter such absolute evil, and also reveals the after-effects of such encounter. Styron while weeping for Sophie actually weeps for the entire humanity that faces such traumatic events like the Holocaust. Thus, *Sophie's Choice* shows Styron's effort to prevent such occurrence in the future by sensitizing human consciousness.

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