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Detachment and Angst in Auschwitz: An Existential Reading of the Tattooist of Auschwitz by Heather Morris

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ABSTRACT

The Tattooist of Auschwitz, written by the New Zealand novelist and screenwriter Heather Morris, is a 2018 Holocaust novel. The novel, loosely based on a true story, reports the inhumane atrocities perpetrated on the innocent prisoners, especially Lale Sokolov, in the concentration camps located in Auschwitz. Despite the profound thematic and artistic significance with which each chapter of the novel is pregnant, it has received scant academic attention. One of the salient yet unnoticed aspects of the novel, which casts itself as an inalienable factor, and which in dealing with each prisoner individually, determines the whole fate of the concentration camps, is hope and despair. The greatest school of philosophy dealing with such fundamental concepts as the illusory meaning of life, the elusive concept of hope, and the construction of truth(s) is *existentialism*. This philosophical concept or school, though had its original seeds sown by Socrates and later nourished by Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, was publicised and given voice by Jean-Paul Sartre in the aftermath of the Second World War. To put its process in order, it dissects the looming and inescapable absurdity, anxiety, and responsibility and the consequences they hold in store for those who have a mind to realize and a mouth to breathe. Elaborating on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and mediations of Holocaust existentialist psychiatrist Victor E. Frankl, endeavouring to unveil the pungent consequences of Nazi atrocities, and analysing characters' mentality in the novel, the present article shows how the prisoners, especially the protagonist, managed to escape meaninglessness by dint of existential dicta.

Keywords: The Tattooist of Auschwitz, Heather Morris, Existentialism, Holocaust novel, and Suicide.

INTRODUCTION:

Heather Morris is a contemporary New Zealand novelist and screenwriter who has carried out the heart-wrenching fictional project of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* which is an outstanding Holocaust novel reciting the harrowing and traumatic experiences of Lale and Gita Sokolov, who witness and endure one of the most appalling crimes such as objectification, sexual violence, death etc. committed in the history of

man in the Hades of Auschwitz concentration camps. As reported both in the novel in question and in *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor E. Frankl, there were more hideous fates than death lurking beneath their feet, dragging them deeper and deeper into the abyss of meaninglessness. The concept of "meaningful life" has been one of the inevitable moot points the philosophy of existentialism has analysed. This popular "ism" is a branch of philosophy led in 20th century by Jean-Paul

Sartre, which seeks to breathe action on all the theorised and purely theoretical philosophies preceding it by focusing on the quotidian horrors and estrangements tossed on the rudimentary passage of life.

This philosophy in cahoots with the analytical and documentary writings of Victor E. Frankl, the Austrian existential psychiatrist who managed to cast his name among the survivors of the Holocaust, analyses the stepping stones leading down to hydra-headed detachment which shrouded the world after World War the Second and the reactions different people produced in the face of such ordeal. At the big picture, meaning is considered as a safeguard against regression, stagnation, and absurdity of life. The approaches to meaning and its absence in existentialism are polyphonic.

Ranging from Jean-Paul Sartre and Victor E. Frankl to Albert Camus and Irvin D. Yalom, all have anchored it in individual and experience. Frankl sees meaning as self-transcendent, and quite similarly, Camus defines it as experiencing life to its fullest. On the other hand, meaninglessness for both Frankl and Camus is emptiness, ennui and estrangement. However, the point to be analysed here is the repercussions the meaningless have in store and reactions taken in the face of them. How this “-less” is filled or avoided by each individual, introduces another quality of existential truths.

Review of Literature

In his iconic philosophical works titled *Being and Nothingness*, (1943) and *Existentialism is Humanism*, (1946) Sartre broaches the fundamental and pivotal question of free will and the worth of life, investigating the causes of “existential angst”, meaninglessness and how they must be fought off. Angst, for Sartre, is the feeling of anxiety and dread rising as a fruit of individual’s confrontation with the basic absurdity of life in general. On the other hand, to narrow down the matter and make it more apposite to the present study, Frankl’s studies of prisoners in the concentration camps, the phases the prisoners went through and internalised, are brought here. Thus, by dint of the aforementioned theories, the present paper seeks, first, to dissect the atrocious crimes and their effects the prisoners suffered, second, to study their reactions and response to the effects (Shahzad, 2022).

Existential Vacuum

Frankl’s Phases

Discernable throughout the novel are the different psychological pits, discovered and elaborated by the Frankl, Lale Sokolov falls into. For Frankl, these pits are the psychological and mental phases together with his inmates he had fallen prey for. Additionally, these phases are explained through the similar difficulties Lale went through, for it is this paper’s object to analyse the camp life of the protagonist. Albeit these pits, namely *shock and apathy* were dug for almost all the camp prisoners of the time, the case of Lale Sokolov is studied in two sections here:

Phase One

Shock

For the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger, the idea of “ecstatic temporality” bestows a qualitative and personalised dimension on the concept of *time*. However, to turn the idea upside-down and personalise the already personalising notion of “ecstatic temporality” and the feelings stored in and carried with it, it can also be supplanted by the miserable “temporality” which leads to dejected Dasein. On the other hand, to personalise and familiarise the matter, it is necessary to make use of Kurt Lewin’s idea of “hodological space” which is often taken as “comfort zone” by psychologists. These spaces, in different stages of life, are the meaningful quality of life, for Sartre how the aforementioned spaces are dealt with and filled determines the meaningfulness and significance of life. Similarly, when these spaces are either left empty or filled perforce by the external, feelings of “nausea” and “anguish” in the face of contingency of self-made existence are ineluctable. Throughout the entering of Lale Sokolov into the concentration camps, the process of detachment starts by appropriation of all his possessions i.e. his clothes. This appropriation ranges from physical possessions to personal spiritual identity. This rupture between who he used to be and what he has been metamorphosed into leads him to shock and despair. This shock is felt closely when, first, he is reminded of his halcyon antebellum days and, second, objectified by having tattooed numbers on his arm instead of the name he had lived with all his life. Having his “spaces” filled and dictated, detached and estranged, drags him, as Albert Camus says, into

the “universe suddenly divested of illusion and lights, [where] man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.” As it can be deduced, Lale’s first phase is interlaced with *absurdity*, shocking absurdity. The present phase is the most traumatising part, for he loses his *why* for life, and is beleaguered by the similar feeling of nausea and de-familiarised habits as Sartre’s Antoine Roquentin. Lale’s job grows even more intolerable as he participates in objectifying his inmates by tattooing numbers on their arms. Finally, all the aforementioned atrocities break the unified concepts of truth and hope into smithereens of fading truths and hopes; betrayed and shunned by his past beliefs, his attempts to pick his cracked existence are in vain.

Phase Two

Apathy

For Frankl, based on his studies of his own self and those of his peer inmates, the second phase appears piecemeal in the wake of the first one. It is characterised by apathy, by desensitisation of prisoners’ antebellum selves, and objectification. Neither the nostalgia for the lost haven nor the desire for the future heaven does bother them. Quite in an identical league with *Man’s Search for Meaning*, the prisoners in the novel in question are compelled to strip themselves naked, not only physically, but also emotionally, “Wipe the smile from your face.” Throughout this phase, much as it is characterised by evaporation of feelings and cognition, the inmates begin to fathom out, touch, and feel the looming meaninglessness; in fact, the only thing capable of being understood is the absence of hope and meaning. According Camus, what leads one to this state is neither a great suffering nor its socially ubiquitous aspect. It is the infinitesimal, personal, and mostly indiscernible derision one comes across on the street or in a party.

Furthermore, the impossibility of an audience, paucity of a reliable person and a spring of hope, however thin and spare, leads the whole camps astray. The pangs of conscience Lale would have during the first period of his imprisonment are bleached pale and no longer

provoke his sympathy. This subjective and spiritual nudity and apathy threatens the five existentially personal themes put forth by Kierkegaard and Sartre, namely individuality, freedom of choice, consciousness, detachment, and responsibility. Returning to the main issue of the article, in the weightier pan of the scales, there is the total of objectifying and atrocious matters, and on the lighter pan stands forlorn and stranded Lale confronting suicide. Throughout the second phase of his imprisonment, he begins to seek mirages of happiness, memories redolent of palmy days, and a spring of life in the form a girl named Gita.

According to Sartre, he breaks away from the *bad faith* in constructing his own subjective truth(s); to usher Jean-Francois Lyotard’s terms into the present paper, it is necessary to juxta-pose *bad faith* with *metanarrative* or *grand narrative* and its contrasting term *little narrative*. In their post-modern analysis of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, the post-apocalyptic setting of which is quite similar to the present novel, Bafandeh Pour, A., and M. Golmohammad Gharehdaghi attribute the dismal ambience of the novel not only to the former grand narratives but also to the present absence of both little and grand narratives. Throughout Lale’s interactions with other prisoners, Gita, and some officers, the restive little narratives begin to develop even within the most monolithic system. The development of the little narratives, or, to use Sartre’s terminology, the drive to abandon bad faith, is mainly triggered by the Nazi system itself by making them suffer unanimously and create a common ground to form dialogues about their shared feelings namely pity, sympathy, empathy, and later apathy. In other words, the shared sufferings perpetrated on Lale, Gita and their inmates embed a sense of camaraderie in the camps. The former statement could be fortified by as many examples as there are detached prisoners reluctant to end their lives.

Additionally, Lale’s meaning-construction or - fabrication process is twofold; the partiality he builds for Gita is not unrequited, their resistance through affection, their rupture with the prevailing brutality through nascent rapture, and their forged bonds with others are reverberated in the general spirit of the camps.

Phase Three

Depersonalisation

While the two former phases are characterised by external torture and agony - the first phase being physical detachment, and the second phase spiritual - the third phase, which relates to the time and occurrences after Auschwitz, according to Frankl, is the inability of sense and perception to grasp what one has been through and how the freed man/woman is incapacitated to rebuild the social, friendly, and familial ties vanished during the traumatic past atrocities. This is the stage where Lale feels alienated and divorced from the self and society he once inhabited, "Many are now barely recognisable, due to bombing.

There is nothing here for him." This process of alienation is hanging on both the individual (inner) and the social (outer). The society Lale used to live in and to which he has returned now has encountered and been traumatised by a similar terror he has been through, thus the pain of reconnection is onerous in the outset. While the first and second phases are involved in a process called detachment and meaning deprivation, the last phase is characterised by *existential angst*. For Sartre, such angst points to the increasing feeling of anxiety and trepidation which emerges the moment individuals confront the fundamental absurdity and contingency of human existence. Lale's entrance into his homeland, and witnessing a gaping difference between the fantasised and abstract image he had embellished in his mind and the looming stone-cold reality, ushers him into the insidious absurdity he had shunned all his camp life. Nonetheless, the existence of Gita was not altogether insignificant here. The survived love encouraging him to seek the lost beloved breathes hope and meaning into him, and relieves the occurrence of absurdity.

An Irony

Out of the application of Frankl's phases combined with Sartre's philosophy, does appear an intriguing situational irony. Juxtaposition of the first pan of scales, on which rest the first and the second phases which are pigeonholed as detachment and suffering, with the second pan on which is the third phase known as anxiety, reveals an interesting paradox in the circumstances and impressions evoked in Lale after those circumstances. While the decoloured and pallid life in

concentration camps was replete with dehumanising and absurd-stricken scenes, the shared scale of suffering and agony never led Lale and Gita to absurdity and total self-alienation. The common suffering everyone in the camps underwent normalised its effects, on the other hand, such sufferings and the resistance they displayed under the thwacks of Nazi animality, bestowed heroic and authentic quality on their lives. On the contrary, the implicit feeling of his sufferings and efforts being unnoticed and neglected, his individual strives for humanity in general being buried in ashes of Birkenau, and the incapability of the tongue and words to articulate the true happenings of the camp sites lead him to a greater misery, that of anxiety and not being understood.

CONCLUSION:

To sum up, the hardships almost all the prisoners in Auschwitz faced, especially Lale Sokolov, were made incapable of hurling them into a nihilistic act of suicide by authentic acts attributed to the philosophy of existentialism. Each prisoner constructed his/her own truth and ushered in their subjective and personalised pinprick of hope. To buttress this conclusion further, a quick glance both at the novel and at the present article would reveal three dominant existential themes leading to resistance in the face of such apocalyptic wasteland. The three aforementioned themes, first, shared sufferings, second, flashbacks to antebellum days and memories and regurgitating them, and third, love and partiality for the other, were shields held by blood, sweat and tears against the monstrosity that threatened not just humans but humanity in general.

"If you wake up in the morning, it is a good day."

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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