NATURE AND DEHUMANIZATION IN *SURVIVAL IN AUSCHWITZ*

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ABSTRACT

In literature, nature has often been portrayed as a space of moral and spiritual reflection. Nature is also represented as a healer of wounded soul and body. However, in Primo Levi's memoir *Survival in Auschwitz,* nature appears to be a place of moral and physical decay. The concentration camp, designed for the very purpose of elimination of the Jewish prisoners, becomes a place of torture and man-slaughter. The physical environment of the camp plays an important role in deciding the fate of the prisoners. Auschwitz camp is not only a place of political and moral brutality but also a place where nature is manipulated to fulfil the purpose of the Nazi regime. The prisoners of the camp are forced to fight cold and harsh weather which ultimately results into physical, moral and spiritual decay. The reduction of the prisoners to mere numbers destroys the individual sense of being human. The social bond required for emotional survival is fractured by the absence of shared language among the prisoners. Here, nature is portrayed as an extension to the camp which dismantles the hope of survival and sense of being alive. Thus, this paper argues that how in *Survival in Auschwitz,* Levi weaves the nature imagery into the thread of his account of devastation and dehumanization of the prisoners in the concentration camp.

KEYWORDS: ecocriticism, environment, holocaust, nature, survival

INTRODUCTION

Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz* gives an account of atrocities perpetrated on the Jewish prisoners by the Nazi regime. The concentration camp is a witness to the brutality and oppression of the totalitarian system where every inhabitant is stripped of his identity and dignity. There is no law in the camp. Only the law of German soldiers and nature is at work. Auschwitz is constructed not as a part of nature, but in opposition to it. Thus, in this paper, the physical environment of the camp is explored through the lens of Ecocriticism as it "is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Levi portrays the camp to be devoid of natural charm and beauty. It is invested with dark, grey, muddy, bleak and squalid scenes where every nook and corner is witness to the torture

and brutality unleashed on the prisoners. There is constant smell of coal, petroleum, mud, smoke and even the clothes of the prisoners "give out a dense smoke at the heat of the stove, with the smell of a kennel or of a sheepfold" (62). There are no trees, no animals, no birds and not even seasons of growth but only horror and decay are prevalent everywhere. Therefore, this study looks into the other side of the nature where only morbid scenes and death dominate. As Astrid Bracke argues, "More ecocritical studies are emerging in which the thematic focus is not on the celebration or preservation of nature, but rather on the darker sides of the natural world, embodied by dirt, phobia and excrement" (13). Through the ecocritical lens, the memoir becomes not only a record of human suffering, but also a powerful critique of how totalitarian system manipulates ecological and bodily systems to erase humanity. In ecocritical terms, Auschwitz functions as an "anti-ecosystem," a space devoid of natural order or interdependence, and one where death is not a consequence of ecological imbalance, but its very purpose. In traditional ecosystems, survival depends on balance, cooperation, and adaptation to the environment however, in Auschwitz, the environment is a controlled mechanism of death, where adaptation means becoming less human, less aware, and less connected to the world around.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Levi's memoir depicts the devastating effects of the political system on humanity inside the concentration camp. Talking about memory of the survivor Risa Sodi (1989) examines Levi's concept of the 'memory of offense' and his views on justice while Uri S. Cohen (2009) examines the role of language in the camp if learnt results into the survival but if not, it could be the end of all struggle and hope for freedom. However, this study lacks the role of nature in the dehumanization of the prisoners of the camp. Henry Maitles (2010) examines the element of guilt in Levi as a holocaust survivor, his importance as a witness to Auschwitz and his similarity with the accounts of other survivors. Similarly, Gilbert Yeoh (2013) attempts to reexamine the legitimacy of the concept of the human being. Peter Arnds (2023) demonstrates how Levi was able to express himself about the trauma he had experienced specifically by employing language and imagery derived from myths such as Tantalus and Homer's Odyssey, but primarily also through the use of metaphor. Filippa Modesto (2025) argues that in exposing the dialectical nature of language, Levi reveals a conception of the world grounded in duality, opposition, and conflict, while conveying a message of hope and resilience in the face of injustice and suffering. Thus, although a considerable amount of

literature is available on trauma, memory, survival and dehumanization, yet limited attention has been paid to the interconnection between nature and dehumanization in *Survival in Auschwitz*. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to explore Levi's use of natural imagery to present the destruction of humanity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study, in order to examine the themes of nature, language, and dehumanization in *Survival in Auschwitz* adopts qualitative and interpretative research methodology. Primarily this study is based on close reading of the text. In order to interpret the selected themes, historical and theoretical sources related to Holocaust literature and trauma study will also be taken into consideration. Through the critical lens the study analyses literary elements such as imagery, symbolism and language to understand the representation of suffering, identity loss, and survival in the concentration camp.

NATURE AND DEHUMANIZATION

Primo Levi has used nature and natural elements for his effective and flawless expression to describe racial prejudice, social, political and cultural turmoil during World War II. In *Survival in Auschwitz,* the human body is presented as a biological system which is fragile and prone to physical and spiritual disintegration. While presenting account of the concentration camp, Levi emphasises that the human body is degraded, exploited, and even stripped of individuality by a system where all the rights of the citizens are taken away. From Levi's account it is learnt that not only the Nazi regime is accused of this brutality but the physical environment of the camp is also an important factor which decides the fate of the prisoners. The physical environment not only destroys the external nature but also invades and dismantles the internal ecology of the prisoners. In the camp, the prisoners are constantly exposed to hunger, exhaustion, sickness, harsh and hostile weather. Levi presents them to be manipulated and engineered on purpose by the Nazi regime. Here, the condition of the inhabitant of the camp is like what Giorgio Agamben calls in *Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* "His entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide" (183).

In the camp, the physical and mental details of the prisoners are described like that of a clinical report. The physical changes, in the body of the prisoners such as weight loss, lack of basic hygiene leading to skin problems, physical decay, and the gradual damage to mental

health, all are mentioned like a medical report. The reduction of human life to basic needs reflects not only a biopolitical system of control but also an ecological collapse within the body itself. As Agamben argues "…every gesture, every event in the camp, from the most ordinary to the most exceptional, enacts the decision on bare life by which the German biopolitical body is made actual" (174). In a balanced ecosystem whether it is internal or external there is regulation and renewal. However, Auschwitz doesn't offer any instead, here nourishment is replaced with starvation, rest with fatigue, and community with loneliness.

The natural cycles, a fundamental feature of the ecological system, are disrupted in *Survival in Auschwitz*. In the camp, day and night, the changing of seasons, life and death all seem to be distorted and rendered irrelevant. The prisoners' life is governed and controlled by commands, toil, violence, hunger and constant threat. Levi minutely portrays environmental details. The changing season becomes one more enemy as with the arrival of the winter season severe cold and snow become instruments of torture and suffering. Winter is no longer a season of beauty and reflection rather it becomes harbinger of starvation and death. The spring season is looked forward to amidst this harsh, hostile and freezing cold weather. According to Levi the sole purpose of the prisoners' is to live up to the spring season. He writes:

> While every breath of wind penetrates our clothes and runs in violent shivers over our defenceless bodies, and everything is grey around us, and we are grey…the rising sun is commented on every day: today a little earlier than yesterday, today a little warmer than yesterday, in two months, in a month, the cold will call a truce and we will have one enemy less. (64)

The arrival of winter season is abhorred and despised as "it means that in the course of these months, from October till April, seven out of ten of us will die. Whoever does not die will suffer minute by minute, all day, every day…" (112). The cold weather acts as an active agent in moral and physical decay of the prisoners. Here, the only purpose the victims have is to live through the winter season. The nature is turned into a tool for the destruction of innocent people by the Nazi regime.

Levi has employed nature imagery to depict dehumanization of the prisoners in the camp. He compares the living conditions of the prisoners in the hut like that of bees in a beehive where hundred and forty-eight bunks are fitted close to each other with the intention of consuming the space up to the roof. Further, he compares the dispersion of the prisoners on the arrival of angry and abusive Kapo to the "chaff in the wind". While talking of the annihilation of

human identity and the consequential machine-like existence of the inhabitants of the camp Levi comments, "when the music plays we know that our comrades, out in the fog, marching like automatons; their souls are dead and the music drives them, like the wind drives dead leaves and takes the place of their wills" (45).

Throughout the memoir, Levi has interwoven images of insects, birds and animal such as "cringing dogs", "animal hurry" "nose like bees for flowers", "tracks like bloodhound", "face looks like a battering ram", "climbs like a monkey", "go like seven awkward chicks behind the hen", "spiders in old webs" and so on. The issue of destruction of nature and natural beauty by Nazis is also raised by him by drawing a contrast between two landscapes surrounding the concentration camp. The environment of the camp is presented to be polluted even the white snow has turned grey which implies destruction of nature, humans and society. The landscape surrounding the camp becomes squalid and ugly while the area on the other side is pure and serene. Levi writes:

> ... Buna is desperately and essentially grey. This huge entanglement of iron, concrete, mud and smoke is the negation of beauty…within its bounds not a blade of grass grows, and the soil is impregnated with poisonous saps of coal and petroleum, and the only things alive are machines and slaves and the former are more alive than the latter. (65)

Levi has also used external landscape to describe inner struggle. Nature imagery is used to express inexplicable life of torture and dehumanization. He says, "while the sun sets in a tumult of fierce, blood-red clouds, they finally make us come out of the hut. Will they give us something to drink? No, they place us in line again…" (25). The prisoners are deprived of dignity and sense of being alive by making them stand and wait for hours in queues. Levi comments, "around us, everything is hostile. Above us the malevolent clouds chase each other to separate us from the sun; on all sides the squalor of the toiling steel closes in on us" (37).

Depicting the plight of the inhabitant of the camp Giorgio Agamben remarks, "He moves in an absolute indistinction of fact and law, of life and juridical rule, and of nature and politics" (185). Levi describes the state of emptiness of the prisoners in the camp. While talking about one of the prisoners, Null Achtzehn, Levi comments, "when he speaks, when he looks around, he gives the impression of being empty inside, nothing more than an involucre, like the slough of certain insects which one finds on the banks of swamps, held by a thread to the stones and shaken by the wind" (37-38). Levi writes in detail on the lack of desire to live

on and state of total indifference in the face of dehumanization and exploitation in the concentration camp.

Non- human elements are impeccably employed into the narrative to portray the state of mind of the prisoners. The forced labour and slavery are tormentors of the prisoners. The ecological deprivation narrows human purpose to animalistic survival. Achtzehn, works like animal. Levi describes him as the one who, "has not even the rudimentary astuteness of a draught-horse…he pulls or carries or pushes as long as his strength allows him, then he gives way at once…he made me think of the sledge-dogs in London's books who slave until the last breath and die on the track" (38). Robert Antelme, French writer, intellectual and holocaust survivor in his memoir *The Human Race* sharing his experience, speaks of the hard toil and its effect on the victims. He remarks, "work is exhausting-and for us, it is absurd-but its effect is to wear, and the SS want us to die from work" (39).

The prisoners in the camp have lost all hope of survival. They just walk and work like machines. Their souls are long dead and they are driven by music like the wind drives the dead leaves. Life of confusion, turmoil and denial of basic human rights and needs is all what they have. The life of the prisoners is compared to a hurricane also. Harsh and pathetic working conditions are prevalent in the camp. The prisoners are engaged in hard labour. Without food and energy, they work hard till the last atom of strength. Levi writes about a hard day at work in the following words:

The sleeper is coated with snow and mud… and the snow slides down my neck. After fifty steps I am at the limit of what a person is theoretically able to support… at every step I feel my shoes sucked away by the greedy mud, by this omnipresent Polish mud whose monotonous horror fills our days. (60)

However, despite portraying the dark, decaying and bleak weather in his memoir, Levi has portrayed nature on its positive side too. As nature leads to perseverance, the anticipation of the arrival of warm weather is a kind of ray of hope for the Jewish prisoners amidst this bestiality and genocide. The warmth of the sun is replenished like a priceless object and is worshipped by cold and hunger beaten prisoners. The brightness of the sun and the smell of paint and tar from the greasy earth remind him of a holiday beach of his infancy. Breathing in the fresh air makes him light- hearted. The sea reminds him of freedom and liberty which seems to be beyond reach amidst this turmoil, racial prejudice, man-slaughter created and controlled by a political system.

CONCLUSION

In the above discussion, the role of nature and natural factors in *Survival in Auschwitz* is analysed to demonstrate the ecological manipulation. Thus, various aspects of nature have been examined and discussed. The prisoners not only fight the torturous and cruel behaviour of the SS but also hunger, fatigue, despair and mental agony. Levi has given subtle details of how in the face of struggle for survival how human values and sensitivity die. The survival strategy teaches the prisoners to become indifferent to everyone and everything. The one who can learn survival tricks and techniques is able to defeat the capricious whims and the arbitrary selections deciding the fate of the prisoners. The weaving of nature and nature imagery into the thread of the memoir has rendered it into an anti- pastoral testimony of dehumanization, trauma and survival.

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