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Fragments of Memory: A Critical Review of Elie Wiesel's *Night*

[*1]Dr. Manisha Mathur

[*1]Associate Professor, Department of English, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

Abstract

This article examines Elie Wiesel's *Night* through the dual lens of Holocaust testimony and trauma theory, situating the text as both a personal narrative and a collective act of remembrance. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Lawrence Langer, and Geoffrey Hartman, the review demonstrates how Wiesel's fragmented and repetitive style reflects the difficulty of articulating trauma, the paradox of survival, and the impossibility of closure. The article emphasises the text's enduring ethical importance to remember, to bear witness, and to resist denial or distortion in contemporary times. By engaging with themes of faith, silence, and the father–son relationship, it argues that *Night* breaks cultural boundaries, resonating not only as a Jewish tragedy but as a universal human warning. Readers will gain a deeper understanding of how trauma disrupts narrative form, how testimony functions as a performative act of memory, and why Wiesel's work remains indispensable in an era marked by historical distortion and cultural forgetting. The conclusion underscores that reading *Night* is not a passive act but an ethical encounter, compelling responsibility across generations.

Keywords: Holocaust, Memory, Trauma, Silence.

Introduction

I chose to write this review of *Night* after seeing pictures and news about the Holocaust Memorial Day, which popped up on my Facebook feed. Holocaust literature has always interested me and this occasion prompted me to reflect on the importance of remembrance. Although I am an Indian and geographically distant from the locations of these atrocities, Wiesel's testimony resonated profoundly with me. The Holocaust, as an attack on humanity itself, surpasses borders and communities, urging readers everywhere to bear witness. Writing about *Night* is my way of engaging with this collective duty to remember and to oppose forgetting and hoping that history never repeats itself and barbed fences never reappear to divide communities.

Elie Wiesel's *Night* (originally published in Yiddish in 1956, French in 1958, and English in 1960) remains one of the most lingering and horrifying personal accounts of the Holocaust. The cover of the book says "A slim volume of terrifying power", which it is indeed. At once a chronicle, testimony, and a work of literature, the book narrates Wiesel's teenage years as he was deported with his family from Sighet to Auschwitz. He was then sent to Buchenwald, where he witnessed the death of his mother and sister, and where his own sense of conviction and compassion were shaken to their core. More than sixty years after its publication, *Night* remains a pivotal work in Holocaust literature. It is not only extremely personal but also resonant in collective memory, being witness to atrocities that one cannot understand why human beings commit. The book confronts readers with questions of history, memory, and trauma that are extremely relevant even today.

The Holocaust, or Shoah, was the organised torture and extermination of six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its partners between 1941 and 1945. Termed as the "Final Solution" by Hitler, it comprised ghettoisation of Jews, deportations to the dreaded "East" forced labour, and extermination camps. The Nazis sought not only to kill but to wipe out Jewish culture, memory, and identity. For Hungarian Jews like Elie Wiesel, the deportations came late in the war. In May to July 1944, in just eight weeks, over four hundred and thirty thousand Jews were deported from Hungary to Auschwitz. Most were "selected" and murdered on arrival. Wiesel and his family were among this final wave. His story thus captures both the swiftness of the annihilation and its planned brutality. The Holocaust remains a defining rupture in modern history: the collapse of the Enlightenment's ideals of progress, reason, and civilisation. Its legacy raises important questions about memory, representation, and the limits of language; questions that *Night* directly confronts.

Wiesel's decision to write *Night* was not immediate. For years after liberation, he kept his feelings pent up, desperate to speak but unable to do so. He wanted to say many things, but was unable to articulate the scale of what he had witnessed. His eventual testimony first took form in a long Yiddish manuscript, later condensed into French and finally into English. The act of condensation itself reflects the tension between memory and representation: how does one give voice to an experience so vast, so cruel, that it resists language?

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Manisha Mathur

Literarily, *Night* belongs to a tradition of Holocaust works that includes Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. Yet unlike Frank's diary, cut short by arrest, or Levi's text, written with a scientific exactness, Wiesel's work is characterised by its sparse and spare language. The rhythm of the sentences mirrors mourning, prayer, and silence, which is frightening.

Night is remarkably short, but its frugality of language only heightens its impact. Wiesel does not indulge in elaborate description; instead, he offers glaring vignettes: arrival at Auschwitz, the scorching pits where children are thrown, and the hanging of a young boy that stays indelibly on the reader's mind. "I had witnessed other hangings. I never saw a single one of the victims weep for a long time those dried up bodies had forgotten the bitter taste of tears". (Wiesel 96). The structure of the novel replicates a descent; from the relative innocence of life in Sighet, through the transports, into the evil world of Auschwitz, and finally to Buchenwald, where liberation brings not joy but a vacuum. The famous final image of Wiesel gazing into a mirror and seeing a corpse stare back at him crystallises the entire narrative trajectory. The annihilation not just of individuals but of an entire moral and spiritual framework (Wiesel 156). Stylistically, Wiesel employs repetition. The refrain of "Never shall I forget…" following his first night in the camp is at once testimony and a solemn prayer of remembrance. Critics like Lawrence Langer note how this style destabilises conventional narrative, transforming memory into fragmented witness (Langer 72).

Trauma studies help illuminate why *Night's* form feels as powerful as its content. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, and the Possibility of History* argues that trauma is not fully grasped at the moment of its occurrence. Instead, it returns belatedly, through flashbacks, nightmares, or compulsive repetition.

"In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon". (Caruth 181)

Wiesel's *Night* demonstrates this delay. He wrote the novel more than a decade after liberation, yet the narrative still feels raw. His fragmented style is brief, shocking images reflect Caruth's claim that trauma defies clear narration. Caruth also emphasises that trauma involves an "unclaimed experience", something survivors cannot fully possess as memory because it was never entirely registered in the first place (Caruth 182). In *Night*, this surfaces in the recurring theme of silence. The silence of God, the silence of the world, the silence imposed upon survivors. Wiesel's testimony is an attempt to speak that which, by definition, cannot be fully spoken. Finally, trauma theory highlights the paradox of survival. To survive is both to escape death and to carry an unbearable burden of memory. Wiesel describes freedom not as relief but as emptiness, captured in the haunting final image of the corpse in the mirror. Here, survival is not salvation but a condition of ongoing trauma. " One day, I was able to get up after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me." (Wiesel 156).

One of the central themes of *Night* is the crisis of faith. Wiesel begins as a devout Hasidic boy, immersed in the study of the Talmud and Kabbalah. Yet in Auschwitz, he witnesses children thrown into flames, a world where God seems absent. The hanging of the young boy, the sad-eyed angel, prompts the question: "Where is God now"? (Wiesel 62). The silent heavens underline the agonising tension between belief and the experience of absolute evil. Silence becomes another key motif. The silence of the world in the face of atrocity, the silence forced on survivors by pain and desolation. *Night* is Wiesel's attempt to break the silence, but also an acknowledgement that no testimony could ever be adequate to do so (Felman and Laub 57).

Perhaps the most emotionally powerful thread in *Night* is the relationship between Wiesel and his father. In the absence of all else, home, community and religion, his father becomes the only anchor of meaning. Their relationship wavers between dedication and intolerable tension. Wiesel sacrifices for his father, yet at times feels shame at resenting the burden of care. The death of his father just before liberation epitomises the cruelty of the camps, denying even closure or grieving for loved ones. "Father", I screamed. "Father! Get up from here you are killing yourself….". For a long time, this argument went on. I felt that I was not arguing with him, but with death itself, with the death he had already chosen". (Wiesel 146-147). Lawrence Langer's concept of choiceless choices is evident here. Decisions made in extremity, where moral frameworks collapse (Langer 90). Wiesel's moments of shame, when he wishes to be free of his father's weakness, momentarily, when he wishes to be free of his father himself, do not reveal moral failure but the damaging effects of a dehumanising system designed to match survival with love.

Night is not merely a memoir; it is testimony. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that survivor narratives serve not simply to recount but to transmit trauma. In this sense, *Night* does not just describe what happened; it talks about the difficulty of narration itself (Felman and Laub 59). Language breaks down and loses meaning. This is reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* where the narrator experiences a similar difficulty; he cannot articulate what he has undergone. He tries to draw diagrams to clear his brain, but that does not help either. Thus, the narrative becomes dense, incoherent and broken.

In *Night* too, the fragmented, repetitive style demonstrates traumatic memory, which resists linear narration. Geoffrey Hartman further emphasises that Holocaust memoirs exist in tension between memory and history, private trauma and public record (Hartman 18). Wiesel's text typifies this, balancing subjective suffering with the demand to bear witness on behalf of millions. Reading *Night* is never an inert act. It challenges the reader with moral dilemmas: "How does one respond to atrocity"? "How does one honour testimony without reducing it to mere literature"? Wiesel himself insisted that *Night* was not simply literature but a sacred duty to remember. Yet its literary qualities cannot be ignored; they are part of what ensures its popularity. The ethical demand is thus doubled: to read it as testimony and as text, never collapsing one into the other.

Critical evaluations structure *Night* as a benchmark for Holocaust studies, trauma theory, and the ethics of representation. Lawrence Langer highlights the collapse of moral categories in Holocaust literature, showing how Wiesel portrays choiceless choices that resist conventional moral judgment (Langer 102). Shoshana Felman emphasises testimony as a performative act, where trauma is both narrated and transmitted (Felman and Laub 63). Geoffrey Hartman situates Wiesel within the tradition of Holocaust memory, stressing the role of testimony in transmitting history to future generations (Hartman 24).

Elie Wiesel's *Night* endures because it speaks across generations, bearing witness to the most radical repudiation of humanity in modern history. It is both history and literature, both personal and collective. Its brevity is illusive and within its pages lies an entire universe of suffering, silence, and the fragile persistence of voice. As Wiesel himself said, to forget would not only be dangerous but also complicit. To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.

In reviewing *Night* today, one cannot help but conclude that its relevance has only increased. In an era where memory is contested and denial persists, Wiesel's testimony remains indispensable. As Shoshana Felman has argued, testimony is not a passive recounting but a performative act, one that binds speaker and listener together. (Felman and Laub 63). The reader cannot remain neutral; by encountering *Night*, one enters into an ethical relationship with the past.

Literarily, *Night* occupies a contradictory space. It is bare yet overwhelming, personal yet universal, disjointed yet whole. This paradox reflects the impossibility of narrating trauma in conventional narrative form. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as an event that is not fully known at the time of its occurrence but only belatedly grasped helps illuminate why Wiesel's style is so fragmented and repetitive (Caruth 181). His language mimics the disjointed return of traumatic memory. It does not allow the reader to move on, but to remain unsettled.

The significance of this responsibility has only grown in contrary times, when denial and distortion of the Holocaust, whether in the form of outright negation "It never happened", or more subtle forms of relativisation, persist in the global sphere. In this context, *Night* stands as a defense against forgetting. The book's brevity ensures its accessibility across generations, while its intensity ensures its unforgettable impact.

For readers outside the Jewish community, such as myself, the book's resonance lies in its insistence that the Holocaust is not only a Jewish tragedy but a human one. To read *Night* as an Indian is to recognise that atrocity anywhere leads to dehumanisation. The universality of its message does not dilute its Jewish specificity but instead extends its ethical demand across cultures and generations. This global reach is one reason Wiesel was later seen as a moral conscience of the world, a role that he both embraced and problematized.

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