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Screening Trauma, Holocaust and Female Incarceration in Steven Spielberg's

Schindler's List (1993): A Foucauldian Study

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Abstract: The Second World War incorporates the memories of the Holocaust and the traumatic experience of the Jewish people belonging to a particular race. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) endeavours to visualize the Nazi occupation and cruelty during the Holocaust making Oskar Schindler as the centre of discussion. This film is significant for the portrayal of social issues like- the Nazi's belief about German superiority, class difference, slavery, discrimination, marginalization, female suffering, ethnic erasure etc. But several critics comment that holocaust is not a subject to be portrayed because it hinders the recuperation process. But the horrible things which human history has witnessed must be presented to the next generation. Many have lost their loved ones; they have suffered a lot, and these horrible deeds of the past must be recollected.

Keywords: *Trauma, Memory, Ethnic Erasure, Incarceration, Holocaust, Female Victims*

Introduction

War means violence, subjugation, torture, trauma and death. War has been a blotch in human history, resulting in trauma, mass execution, mental breakdowns, poverty, destruction and human misery. Human history has witnessed two great World Wars and even today, nation builders are proclaiming their war cries to manifest their superiority. One of the most terrible incidents that the Second World War has brought about is the Holocaust. The dreadful events of the Holocaust have enmeshed human history with traumatic memories of shock and deep-rooted wounds. During the

Second World War, the Nazis perpetrated a genocide that took the lives of nearly six million Jews because of their belief that the Germans were racially superior to the Jews. During the time of the Third Reich, Nazi Germany formed more than 44,000 camps and incarceration sites. The Nazis opened many forced labour camps where the prisoners died of starvation and work pressure. Camps were built to imprison the opponent groups. The first concentration camp was Dachau, established in March 1933 and it was the longest-running camp. In many camps, the bodies of the victims were used for medical experiments by the Nazi doctors. Gas chambers were also installed in the camps. The film *Schindler's List* (1993) endeavours to manifest the traumatic experience of the Jews caused by Nazi perpetration during Holocaust and their deliverance by the protagonist Oskar. The film poignantly portrays social issues like- the Nazi's belief about German superiority, class difference, slavery, discrimination, marginalization, female suffering, ethnic erasure etc. This paper however aims to discuss the women's experience of the Holocaust in the film.

A blend of narrative and visual analysis will be undertaken in the context of trauma in the essay as several shots in the film are closely associated with female incarceration. Selective insights from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) has been considered important for the critical analysis of trauma in the film. It studies the historical appearance of the prison in its modern form, starting with the disappearance of the public execution in favour of execution hidden behind bars. The body captured behind the bars becomes a subject to power relation. A thorough understanding of the body forms a mastery over it. Power and knowledge are interrelated. Knowledge gained by prison custodians produces a certain 'technology of power'. Foucault notes that "power produces knowledge... power and knowledge directly imply one another, there is no power relations without the corrective constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relation" (Foucault 27). Power targets body, the docile body is subjected and transformed. The primary aim of disciplinary power is to train the body. The notions of 'sovereign power' and 'disciplinary power' also have been used for the critical analysis of the Nazis in the film.

Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* is adapted from Thomas Keneally's novel *Schindler's Ark* (1982). In his memoir *Searching for Schindler* (2007), Thomas Keneally talks of Poldek Pfefferberg, a holocaust survivor, who persuaded Keneally to write Schindler's story. After the publication of the novel, Pfefferberg convinced Spielberg to produce a film adapted from

Keneally's novel. *Schindler's List* portrays the horror of the ethnic cleansing and human misery. The film is based on the life of a German capitalist and a Nazi party member Oskar Schindler who rescued 1,200 Jews during Holocaust by engaging them in his factory. Schindler establishes his factory with the help of Itzhak Stern and employs Jews because they were cheaper than the Poles workers. Stern tries to save the Jews from execution by employing them in Schindler's factory. Plaszow labour camp is built, and Jews are evicted from the Krakow ghetto and sent to the camp. Schindler is moved after watching the destruction and human misery. Schindler convinces the Nazi commandant Amon Goeth to sell him the Jews to work in his factory in Czechoslovakia. Thereby, it becomes a tale of metamorphosis of Oskar Schindler from an industrialist to a messiah. Except some selective scenes, most of the scenes are in black-and-white and this monochromatic style adds a documentary like quality to the film. Keeping in mind the fact that he was making a historical film, Spielberg coalesces history and memory, imaginary and the real. This amalgamation allows Schindler's *List* to be a potent delineation of the Holocaust myth.



Fig 1. The little girl in red coat

The film opens with a scene in colour, but the whole film is set in bizarre black and white surrounding with a glimpse of red and somber classical music which situates the gloomy atmosphere of the film. Schindler notices a little girl in a red coat walking down the street in a calm manner, her innocence and ignorance creates a contrast to the mass murder and destruction.

Here, the glimpse of red colour among the black and white surrounding catches the eyes of the audience and this red colour becomes symbolic of the blood of the Jews. But later he observes her body amidst the heap of carcass of the Jews and he is determined to relieve the helpless victims. This tiny innocent girl causes Schindler to discern the brutality of the Nazis

We first encounter Schindler in a luxurious suit but his face is portrayed in darkness suggesting his ignorance about the atrocity and horrors of Holocaust and he is only concerned about his own benefit. Later in the film we come across another scene where the old and disabled Jews are prepared to be transferred to the gas chamber; Schindler is in a white suit whereas the Nazi officers are in black suit. The colour symbolism suggests his transformation from a capitalist to a saviour. Another noticeable thing is that the Jews are carrying black and white photographs along with them suggesting that they have lost their possession but not the memories.

There always runs a morbid music in the background intensifying the sombre mood of the film but the tone of the music alters with reference to the sequences. In scenes of utter suspense and anxiety, there is no music. For example, when the Jewish prisoners are locked in the gas chamber, there is the sound of shrieking and panting, but no music. The underlying silence intensifies the stress and tension of the death moment and helps the audience to realize the feeling of the incarcerated victims. So, music and intermittent silences play important roles not only in determining the mood of the film but also for aggravating the precariousness of the situation.

The term 'trauma' is derived from the Greek word meaning 'wound'. In medicinal term, trauma refers to a wound caused by violence. In psychology, trauma suggests individual experience, or a group experience caused by war, accident, torture, sexual abuse (Walker 3). Judith Herman associated a person's psychological trauma with the study of hysteria when a person's psychological disorder results from a traumatic experience and this trauma may lead to amnesia (Herman 12). After World War II, mental breakdowns of soldiers caused by shell shock becomes an intriguing issue to talk about. In 1964, William Niederland talks of 'survivor syndrome' faced by Holocaust survivors (Hass 8). This also includes sexual violence and torture faced by female survivors during the Holocaust. Spielberg's *Schindler's List* unfolds execution and exodus of a half million of Jews during Nazi autocracy and how this heinous atrocity causes collective memory of trauma.

Oskar Schindler and Nazi commandant Amon Goeth are the two contradictory characters who make things happen in the film. First one stands for the helpless Jews and the second stands for the evils of Nazi Germany. Here, certain notions from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality* may be useful for analyzing the incarceration and suffering of the Krakow Jews. A scene from the movie can be elaborated where the Jews are ordered to register their names before entering the camp. This scene presents the instruments of disciplinary power such as paper, typewriter, ink which are defined by Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* as "coextensive with the multiplicity that they regiment, such as hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification" (Foucault 480). Registration process transforms the Jews into mere names and they are reduced to docile bodies to be disciplined. Jews are forced to leave their homes and enter the ghetto by March 20, 1941, which is suggestive of Foucault's idea of 'exile of the leper' (Foucault 468). In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault calls Nazi power structure as a hybrid of both disciplinary and sovereign power. The labour camp, tools of control (pen, paper, ink, typewriter) stand for the disciplinary power whereas the scenes of mass execution in gas chamber indicate the exercise of sovereign power where authority decides who will survive or die.

Memorialization process of Holocaust also attempts to recount the Nazi perpetration and violence against women. Spielberg's *Schindler's List* unobscures a tale of suffering in which man is at the center of action whereas women are submissive second-class citizens. There is no portrayal of strong autonomous women, but we get glimpses of exploitation of women through a plethora of female characters like the women in camp, the maid Helen Hirsch, the engineer Diana Reiter, Amon Goeth's mistress, women in gas chamber. So, this essay attempts to show how Spielberg memorializes Holocaust and how his representations visualize the captivity and suffering of the women in general. It also attempts to outline how Spielberg memorializes Holocaust and how his representations visualize the captivity and suffering of women in general. War and political conflict demolish lives, families, economy but throughout history women are targeted as easy preys, - especially as sexual instrument during wartime. The film portrays the women who have been transformed into imprisoned objects of the Nazi government. In most of the cases, portrayal of women during the holocaust elicits marginalization deciphering intertwined aspect of Nazism and patriarchy. In most cases, women are portrayed as passive, tragic victims defined by their relation to men as wives, lovers, and mothers. In Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, many of the female characters are objectified through men's glances and actions.

This objectification process is elaborated in a sequence, where the Nazi commandant Amon Goeth targets his rifle at his naked mistress lying on bed. Instead of shooting, Goeth enters bathroom and urinates. Thereby, shooting, fornication, and urination become indistinguishable drawing an identification among Jews, his mistress, and the toilet. Women become the playthings in Amon's hand. He shoots them whenever he wishes though they have not done anything wrong. He orders to kill the engineer Diana Reiter when she exposes the faults in the design of the construction of the labour camp. Amon cannot tolerate the fact that a woman can give him suggestion. But later we encounter that he commands the workers to do the needful suggested by Diana. Conversation between Diana and Amon goes like this:

Diana: "My name is Diana Reiter. I am a graduate of Civil Engineering from the University of Milan."

Amon: "Ah, an educated Jew. Like Karl Marks himself."

Diana: "Herr Kommandant, I'm only trying to do my job."

Amon: "Ja, I'm doing mine. Shoot her here. On my authority." (Spielberg 00:48:23-00:50:45)



Fig. 2. A Nazi officer shoots Diana Reiter

There is another sequence, in which a group of naked women are put in the gas chamber and the audience can look at the terrified Jewish women through a peephole. The women scream and cry but instead of gas, water flows out of the pipe. It is another occasion where the camera eroticizes the Jewish female body. Peephole dissociates the audience from the victims and elicits scopophilic pleasure for the audience at the sight of human suffering. This brings in the discussion of Laura Mulvey's idea of 'male gaze' making women as objects to be looked at. So, the controlling power of male gaze reflects the power imbalance between men and women- "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact..." (Mulvey 6).

We encounter another scene where Goeth hits his maid, Helen and this incident can be elaborated by applying Mulvey's notion of voyeurism and fetishism. Voyeurism implies the idea of women's lack of phallus and 'fetishistic scopophilia' negates castration anxiety. Mulvey formulates, "fetishism...is born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to know, and a refusal to accept the difference that the female body symbolizes" (Mulvey 52). The polar opposition of attraction and repulsion runs through the film when Helen (Amon's maid) becomes both an object of attraction and repulsion for Amon. Amon beats Helen because he struggles to maintain a balance between his sexual desire towards Helen and his hatred towards her as she is a Jew. The scene runs like this: Helen comes out of the shower room in her nightdress; her nipples are erected and her body becomes the object of gaze both for Amon and the camera. Amon observes Helen and chastises her saying she is a sub-human as she belongs to a lower race. So, Amon refers to the stereotypical image of Jewish woman as evil masked with beauty. Nazism often presents Jewish women as seductress for making the sin of Rassenschande (sexual relation between Aryans and non-Aryans). Nazis are afraid of sexual agency of Jewish women and women are portrayed as dangerous women.

Suffering of the Jews moved Schindler so much that he was transformed into a reliever for the helpless victims. His wife Emilie Schindler also became his partner in his attempts to rescue the Jews. A holocaust survivor, Maurice Markheim talks to Schindler's wife and says: "She got a whole truck of bread from somewhere on the black market. They called me to unfold it. She was

talking to the SS and because of the way she turned around and talked, I could slip a loaf under my shirt. I saw she did this on purpose. A loaf of bread at that point was gold... There is an old expression: Behind the man, there is the woman, and I believe she was the great human being” (Bulow 2005). He ran his factory not for production but for saving the Jews and spent his huge amount of money to relieve the Jews. In the last scene, we find Schindler meeting his factory workers for the last time, the survivors make a ring for Schindler from the gold tooth of a worker with an engraving of a Talmudic phrase- ‘whoever saves one life saves the world entire.’ His meeting with the Jews ends with this conversation:

Schindler: “I could have got more.”

Stern: “There are, 1,100 people who are alive because of you.”

Schindler: “I didn’t do enough. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten people. This pin. Two people. He would have given me one. One more. One more person. I could have gotten one more person and I didn’t” (Spielberg 03:15:55- 03:20:00).



Fig. 3. Schindler and his wife visiting their factory



Fig.4. The Poster

Conclusion

Schindler's List, a historical drama film attempts to make the viewers realize the unthinkable trauma of human misery. The film with its graphic details of the Holocaust questions the morality of the perpetrators and their level of brutality. Spielberg states, "I consider the biggest sin is to forget or to ignore the most barbaric act perpetrated by man in modern history" (Queen's Quarterly 29). Though much time has flowed since then, there is a need to memorialize the Holocaust so that we don't repeat history.

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