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Gray Zone: Privileged Prisoners the Silent Witnesses

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Abstract:

The catastrophe executed by Adolf Hitler, Nazis and his allies better known as Holocaust is one of the most heinous massacres happened in the history of existing humanity ever. The present article will throw some light on the plight of innocent Jews who witnessed the most abominable crime perpetrated by inhumanity. Adolf Hitler and allies built almost seventy-two concentration camps in Germany and around. Auschwitz was the biggest concentration camp where the Jews were segregated and imprisoned and experienced the darkest days of their life. Around six million Jews along with gypsies, Romas and homosexuals were the victims of this holocaust. The present article will explore the thin line gap between two types of prisoners there. One type was of the misfortunates who experienced torture, guilt, shame and ultimately died. Other type was fortunate enough to escape death and atrocities being practised there. These prisoners became the assistants of SS soldiers and perpetrated torture on other prisoners. Hitler's "Final Solution" created a chaos in Europe at the moment when the other part of the world was witnessing World War II. Here I am concerned about the third party in-between the oppressed and oppressors, known as Gray Zone.

Keywords: Holocaust, Catastrophe, SS soldiers, Gray Zone, Euthanasia programme, Kapos, Lager

Introduction:

The present research article will describe a very popular and renowned term Gray Zone in the context of Primo Levi's work *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). Primo Michele Levi was an Italian Jew, a chemist, writer and a fortunate survivor of holocaust shifted to Auschwitz in February 1944 along with 650 prisoners. He was 24 years old when he was incarcerated and transported to concentration camp. It is shocking to find that only fifteen men and eight women survived. Levi shot in news when he hurled himself down the deep stairwell of his residence in Turin. His suicide shocked the critics, reviewers and the Holocaust historians.

In Europe Levi was a famous writer who evolved a poignant style to depict his first-hand experiences of the concentration camps with clarity and lucidity. But in America he received acclaim only after his death and with his interview with Philip Roth in Turin and its publication in the *New York Times Book Review*. Levi became an international celebrity after his death. His critics and reviewers observed that he spent his entire life to tell the world the horrors of Holocaust and the abominable life that he and other Jews led in their interment in Auschwitz.

Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* presents the perspective of a survivor revealing how the Holocaust is remembered, forgotten and stereotyped by other survivors. Levi alludes to the existential philosophy of Camus and Sartre evoking the nature of hell described in Dante's *Inferno*. Primo Levi recognized the Holocaust as "a second fall of man,". Levi had experienced the hellish life like Dante's *Inferno*, he soon decided to narrate all he witnessed and experienced in Auschwitz. He identified himself as a chemist and soon became famous in the world as a "writer-chemist, survivor-witness" of Holocaust literature. Levi was a born storyteller; he used multi-faceted techniques to depict dehumanization and systematic of decimation of Jews in the concentration camps.

Hitler's "Final Solution" was a savage attack on the humanistic values so enshrined the works of Dante and Darwin. Levi gives a dispassionate account of horror that he experienced during his stay in Auschwitz. Richard Norman in his book *On Humanism* (2004) called Levi's *Drowned and the Saved* as "one of the great documents of humanism". Levi's novel *The Drowned and the Saved* received favourable reviews by the critics and historian of Holocaust Literature. The novel is packed with a series of meditations focusing on "the Lager machine that decimated the Jews in millions. Levi has narrated a touching event symbolizing his sense of shame and guilt. Levi argues that many survivors endured their captivity in shame and with the burden of guilt. Many survivors endured their captivity by exhibiting their selfish nature. In the concentration camps SS guards treated the prisoners in a savage and brutal manner. They were subjected to physical torture, moral indignity and sexual oppression. The Nazis started their "euthanasia programme" and soon all the concentration camps became the brutal killing centres of the Jews.

Levi's chapter on "The Gray Zone" is packed with ethical, philosophical issues and forms the crucial part of Levi's Auschwitz experience. Levi was a Doctorate in Chemistry and a well-read person. He borrowed heavily from the Holocaust Studies, philosophy, law, history,



theology, feminism and popular culture. His chapter *The Gray Zone* (Lions Gate, 2001) appeared on the screen in Hollywood. The term Gray zone was coined by Primo Levi to describe the moral ambiguity and a very thin line gap between the oppressed, oppressors and the bridge in between them. This bridge was the Gray zoned people who were prisoners but worked under the commands of SS soldiers. “We also tend to simplify history; but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single, unequivocal fashion” (36). At the very outset of the chapter Levi gives out his own perception about history singling out popular history and the history taught in schools. He rejects the binary approach between friend and enemy; good and evil and takes a holistic view to explore human nature. Levi honestly depicts the mindset of the prisoners who obtained “privileged “positions. Levi talks about the Kapos who enjoyed despotic powers to crush the prisoners and to run the factory of death of the Nazis. Kapos, labor squads, were forced to work in the crematoria just to survive. His perspective of a survivor has opened fresh scope to reinterpret the themes of the Holocaust history. Millions of prisoners were killed in the concentration camps and only a fraction of them survived to narrate their hellish experiences of Auschwitz. The plan of the Nazi was to kill all and demolish all evidence, no eye witness was to remain alive. Levi argues that those who survived were “privileged prisoners,” they had the moral courage to propagate the horrible truth to the world and their testimony must be relied upon by the Holocaust historians. Levi points out that in the Lager there were many prisoners who “collaborated with the SS Guards to persecute the fellow prisoners” (9).

The Jewish leadership in the ghettos was a facade as the Nazis used and abused the “privileged prisoners” to further their devilish plan. These privileged prisoners belong to a group of people living in a “gray zone”

It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and slaves both diverge and converge.... The harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness ... to collaborate (42).

Levi addresses a complex and sensitive issue of prisoners in his chapter “The Gray Zone”. They suffered process of dehumanization at the Lager, they used the tools of tolerance and patience” to survive in harsh environment. Levi has discussed in detail the life in the Lager and the prevailing network of human relationships. The prisoners were not allowed to mix up with the others and they were not allowed to form unity. There were only two categories; the victims and the persecutors” (37). In this chapter Levi analyses the human

nature issues that emerge from the state of conflict (8). He found the Lager in a state of war between “the We/They, Vanquished/Victor, Good Guy/Bad Guy situation”. The Nazis structured such a hierarchical system in which the prisoners also became the oppressors. The small functionaries were selected from the Jews to run the administration. They had to carry the orders; they would transport the weak and the sick to the crematoria. There were oppressors among victims, victims among oppressors. This was a confusing situation in the Lager. The structure of the Lager thrives on ambiguity and encouraged the "ascent of the privileged. . . where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge" (42). The Gray Zone was a network formed by the Nazis “to establish a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back” (43). The ultimate goal of this bond was to "consolidate established privilege vis-à-vis those without privilege" (43). They soon discovered that the world of Auschwitz was a terrible and indecipherable. As Levi reiterates, “it is difficult to defend oneself against a blow for which one is not prepared” (38).

Levi observes that the “privileged prisoners” were in minority but they were silent witness of the majority of the “unprivileged prisoners” subjected to hardships; “physical torments, the cold and the illness, hunger and starvation within the Lager” (41). The prisoners were subjected to all types of humiliation. Dignity is an alien concept since in order to survive the prisoners were forced into actions which made them ashamed of themselves. Primo Levi has discussed the dilemmas of the survivors through the chapter “The Gray Zone”.

Levi’s main focus is to "meditate the story of the “crematoria ravens” with pity and rigor, but judgment of them must be suspended. Levi is confronted with the moral dilemma and to resolve it he explores the nature of human judgment and its representation. Levi observes that when man is confronted with a catastrophic event such as the Holocaust, moral judgment is obligatory. Levi argues that the perpetrators of the Holocaust must be judged for their actions. Levi comments on the complexity of the experience thus:

The history of the Lager is full of inhuman activities. A civilized man will be shocked to read the episodes and the nature of hellish life of the Lager. The prisoners witnessed the real play of the evil forces. It was worse than a Nuclear Holocaust (23).

Levi begins with the “entry ritual” of the prisoners and narrates the whole story of his “moral collapse” in simple and lyrical style. He is subjected to all kinds of physical, moral



and spiritual tortures. Levi observes: “He wants' to tame you, extinguish any spark of dignity that he has lost and you perhaps still preserve. But trouble is in store for you if this dignity drives you to react” (41). Time cannot heal the wound of their humiliation as Langer states:”. Levi comes to the conclusion that human identity is determined by external circumstances (17). Levi refers to Arndt and her theory of the totalitarian state in the first chapter of the novel and observes that the Nazi had planned a despotic and totalitarian administration in Auschwitz. Nobody dared to oppose the policies of the Nazis. Levi comments:

Thus the Lager is the totalitarian state; no one dared to oppose the policy of the Germans. In the totalitarian state all power is invested from above and control from below is almost impossible. The Nazis were all powerful (7).

In the Lager the prisoners had no choice but to follow the unjust and barbarous commands of the SS officers. Levi has discussed the circumstances which made the innocent prisoners the collaborators. Levi observes that it is not possible to pass judgment on them. The strategy of the Nazi was to dehumanize the prisoners completely. For them survival was the main motive and in order to escape death they took up the menial jobs. They became sweepers, kettle washers, night watchmen bed smoothers, checkers of lice and scabies. Levi has given a sympathetic treatment to these prisoners. In this chapter Levi assesses the complicity and guilt of the innocent prisoners who were forced to perform ignoble and inhuman duties. Levi absolves the “low ranking functionaries”. He asserts that the Nazis had created a malevolent system to decimate the Jews in a cruel manner. Low ranking officers were a part of the system. They were deputed to carry the orders. For one thing, “the greatest responsibility lies in the system” (44) and it encouraged depravity. Levi doesn't pass any judgment on those who themselves suffered so much: “I ask that we meditate on the story of ‘the crematorium ravens’ with pity and rigor, but that judgment of them be suspended” (60). The SS had developed a destructive planning to absolve themselves of the worst crimes of tossing the victims into the burning chimney. The Nazi created Special Squads to serve their purpose and to continue the death factory. The members of the Special Squads were given manifold tasks. They were given the duty to extract the dead bodies from the chambers. They would pull gold teeth from the jaws of the Jews. They would cut women's hair and collect clothes and shoes. Their main job was to transport the bodies to the chimney area (50).

The Nazi tried their best to shift their burden of guilt on to the innocent prisoners; the shift of guilt from the perpetrators to the victims is an interesting strategy of the SS officers.

Levi observes that the Nazi denied the victims even the “solace of innocence.” (53) Levi argues that all Germans were responsible for the extermination of the Jews. It was a collective guilt for the Holocaust (15). He discusses in detail the nature of coercive power of the institutions. The Nazi built the enormous crematoria in the Lager to kill the Jews (179). Levi remarks thus:” The Special Squads were made up largely of Jews. The main function of the SS Guards in Auschwitz was to destroy Jews (51-52). The members of the SS were kept apart from other prisoners as they had the first-hand knowledge and secrets of the horrendous deeds of the Nazis. They were not allowed to mix with others or share their secret with “unprivileged prisoners.” They were served large amount of free alcohol and they were found in a state of debasement. They had no option but to carry out the orders of SS guards. Levi has explored the mental psyche of these “privileged prisoners” who were crazy in life. These prisoners led a hellish life carrying with them the burden of guilt. Levi gives the imagery of abyss to depict the traumatic life of the prisoners. The Germans boasted of their superiority and the Nazis had a perfect plan in creating the Special Squads:

We, are the master race; we are superior to you people. We are the real destroyers, we can destroy and kill you when we like. We can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours (53).

In the last part of the chapter, Levi discusses in detail the controversial role of Jewish Chaim Rumkowski of the Lodz Ghetto. Levi’s concept of the gray zone holds that Rumkowski should not be condemned for his behaviour *in extremis* because they were coerced to follow the dictates of the SS guards. Levi evokes moral judgment analysing the case study of Chaim Rumkowski who was forced to work the extermination machinery. Rumkowski was a Jew leader; he was sixty years old and a widower without children. He was a ruler known for his cruelty and dictatorship. He had been barbaric but he had a wonderful sense of organization. He could manage anything” (63). Chaim Rumkowski adopted the dictatorial style of Mussolini and Hitler to persecute and oppress the innocent to propagate terror in the minds of the people. Levi depicts his despicable character thus:

More likely, however, his attitude was based on the ideology of dictatorship.. He spoke like a man who has throne and scepter, who is not afraid of being contradicted or derided (64).

Levi’s paradigmatic analysis of Rumkowski is quite interesting as it is based on the universal application of human nature. He faces a moral dilemma to pass judgment on him.



Levi investigates the nature of power in the right perspective brushing aside all prejudices. He observes thus:

Power is like a drug: but it is very useful remedy to bring order out of chaos. Rumkowski was very powerful as he used unlimited power to decimate the Jews from the globe. All were scared of him; he would send prisoners to the gas chamber just for minor offences. He was cruel; barbarous and a true follower of Hitler (67).

Levi concludes that Rumkowski was not a monster but an ordinary man like us. He was forced to become a part of the ghetto power dynamics. Levi did not write a novel to entertain the readers but he was depicting the serious tale of horrifying experiences of the death camps. He has depicted the murderous role of the Kapos and other Lager functionaries. Levi concluded that the life and terrifying activities of Rumkowski revealed the decline of civilization. Rumkowski was an ambiguous personality. He symbolized the decline of civilization. “Western civilization that descends into hell with trumpets and drums”...” (69). Levi argues that the position of Rumkowski was dangerous. His four years of his presidency depicted his dictatorship, his diabolical dreams and his barbaric vitality. Levi characterizes him arrogant, despotic and cruel person. He hated the Jews and used derogatory remarks for the Jews. He was “authoritarian, renegade and accomplice (46). These privileged prisoners were appointed by Nazis to act as interpreters as well some times.

Levi describes Rumkowski as a symbol of oppression and barbarity. In the last part of this chapter, Levi comes to the conclusion that it is fair to pass judgment on the victims or persecutors of Auschwitz. He tries to resolve his dilemmas in his quest for universal truth exploring the nature of human beings. He comments thus on human nature: “Like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility: willingly or not we come to terms with power” ... (51).

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi looks back on the books he had published about Auschwitz and broods over the question of guilt and shame. The survivor of Auschwitz is caught in a paradox to tell or to be silent on the experiences of Auschwitz. Indeed, his suffering has stripped him of the tools for speaking. His harrowing experiences in the Lager wrecked his ability to talk about it. Levi recalls having observed the public execution in Auschwitz of a man who had resisted, who had taken part in a successful plan to

blow up one of the crematoria, and of being tormented afterwards by the thought: “You too could have, you certainly should have” (24).

Carole Angier spent ten years in writing the biography of Primo Levi. Angier observes that “the closer a trauma comes to you, the more likely, not less, you are to express it (Angier 448). He records that after the war ended,” Primo Levi the silent one, the listener, who never started a conversation in his life, before or after, was transformed” and his family and close friends speculated that “his experience had given him “strange power of speech” (421). Gordon also observes that Levi spoke constantly in public about his Holocaust experience and about his books”. This was a time when the details and dimensions of the Holocaust were not widely known. In the Lager nobody was responsible and the prisoners witnessed men stooping at the lowest depths just to carry out the orders of Nazis. They had given up all moral scruples for their struggle to survive in the harsh environment. All human values dissolved in the Lager and the complicity to the crime was a common feature. Levi frankly tells that values, ideals and dreams of civilization crumbled before the prisoners who witnessed the naked dance of death silently. The sufferings of the prisoners were the result of violent behaviour of the SS guards, beating, humiliation and intimidation was a common thing and in all the violent actions there was no logic. Gray zone watched the degradation of the innocent prisoners day and night silently as they couldn't do anything for them. Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* shows the categorized prisoners into two categories. One was drowned, the victims of holocaust and the other category again falls into two different parts. One of the survivors who were fortunate enough to escape the death and the other was more fortunate who acted as puppets in the hands of the Nazis; the gray zone.

Conclusion:

The present article has reinterpreted the original testimony of the Holocaust survivors with a view to explore their traumatic experiences of Auschwitz and Buna; their hellish journey of life; their loss of identity and the process of dehumanization. Levi does not lose his humanity and sanity by saying that gray zone was a forcible team to subjugate innocent people. Had they got a chance to escape this forcible perpetration, they would have never been so cruel and animal like to the prisoners. Primo Levi contends that the Holocaust was more than just a physically executed destruction of humanity. It was an ideological war, an operation of precise and finely tuned warfare against the humanity of victims and in that context Gray Zone played a very complexed role in between the persecutors and the victims.



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