

## THE EMBODIMENT OF HUMILIATION AND TERROR AGAINST JEWS IN THE NOVEL NIGHT BY ELIE WIESEL

©*Mukhamedova Sh.*, ORCID: 0000-0002-3685-3051, Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, obidjonova993@gmail.com

## ВОПЛОЩЕНИЕ УНИЖЕНИЯ И ТЕРРОРА В ОТНОШЕНИИ ЕВРЕЙСКОГО НАРОДА В РОМАНЕ ЭЛИ ВИЗЕЛЯ «НОЧЬ»

©*Мухамедова Ш. У.*, ORCID: 0000-0002-3685-3051, Узбекский государственный университет мировых языков, г. Ташкент, Узбекистан, obidjonova993@gmail.com

*Abstract.* The article studies the Holocaust reflection in the novel Night by American-Romanian author, laureate of the Nobel Prize Elie Wiesel. Being a prisoner himself, created the best works about the Holocaust repressions and tortures of the Jewish nation by Nazi during the Second World War. The article is aimed to give a new definition to the concept of “Holocaust” on the basis of a literary analysis of the suffering of Jews through the eyes of survivors in concentration camps. The methodology of analysis, based on a combination of cultural, historical and biographical approaches to the novel, enables to reveal the new explanation of the phenomenon which incorporates humiliation, discrimination, repression and extermination.

*Аннотация.* В статье исследуется художественное воплощение темы Холокоста в романе «Ночь» американско-румынского писателя, лауреата Нобелевской премии — Эли Визеля. Будучи сам жертвой нацизма во время Второй мировой войны, он создал лучшие произведения о Холокосте, репрессиях и пытках еврейского народа. В статье предпринята попытка дать новое определение понятию «Холокост» на основе литературно-художественного отображения страданий евреев глазами выживших в концлагерях. Методология анализа произведения, основанная на сочетании культурно-исторического и биографического подхода к роману, позволяет раскрыть новое объяснение феномена, включающего в себя унижение, дискриминацию, репрессии и истребление евреев.

*Keywords:* Holocaust, humiliation, separatism, discrimination, repression, extermination.

*Ключевые слова:* Холокост, унижение, сепаратизм, дискриминация, репрессия, истребление.

### Introduction

The collective exile of the Jewish nation and their life-long pain during WWII is marked with the word Holocaust. Although the term *Holocaust* according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary [1] literally means the killing of millions of Jews however, its origin goes back to ancient Greece. The translation of the Hebrew word “olah”, meant a burnt sacrifice offered whole to God. The term gained wide usage when arrested Jews unwillingly sometimes, willingly were brought to the death camps and were burned a whole in crematoria or open fires alive. Not denying the term definition, the focus of this researcher is to offer a new explanation basing on the novel Night by Elie Wiesel who himself was in concentration camps and witnessed all possible atrocities by the Nazi regime.

Apparently, any historical event finds its reflection on world literature and Holocaust was not exception though. All fictional, non-fictional works created by Jews, Non-Jews gave birth to The Holocaust literature, which now does not lose its power to interact audiences. The novel that was taken under research also is built on this very theme and deal with the fate of Romanian Jews' tortures and heartless action of Germans against them.

Indeed, reconsideration of the target phenomenon came after the reading Night, since it encompasses all negative and dark words as — humiliation, the act of repressing, discrimination and extermination of Jewish people by fascist wartime regime (Figure 1). Moreover, finding examples and analyzing our new definition of Holocaust in the novel is a part of the article objectives.

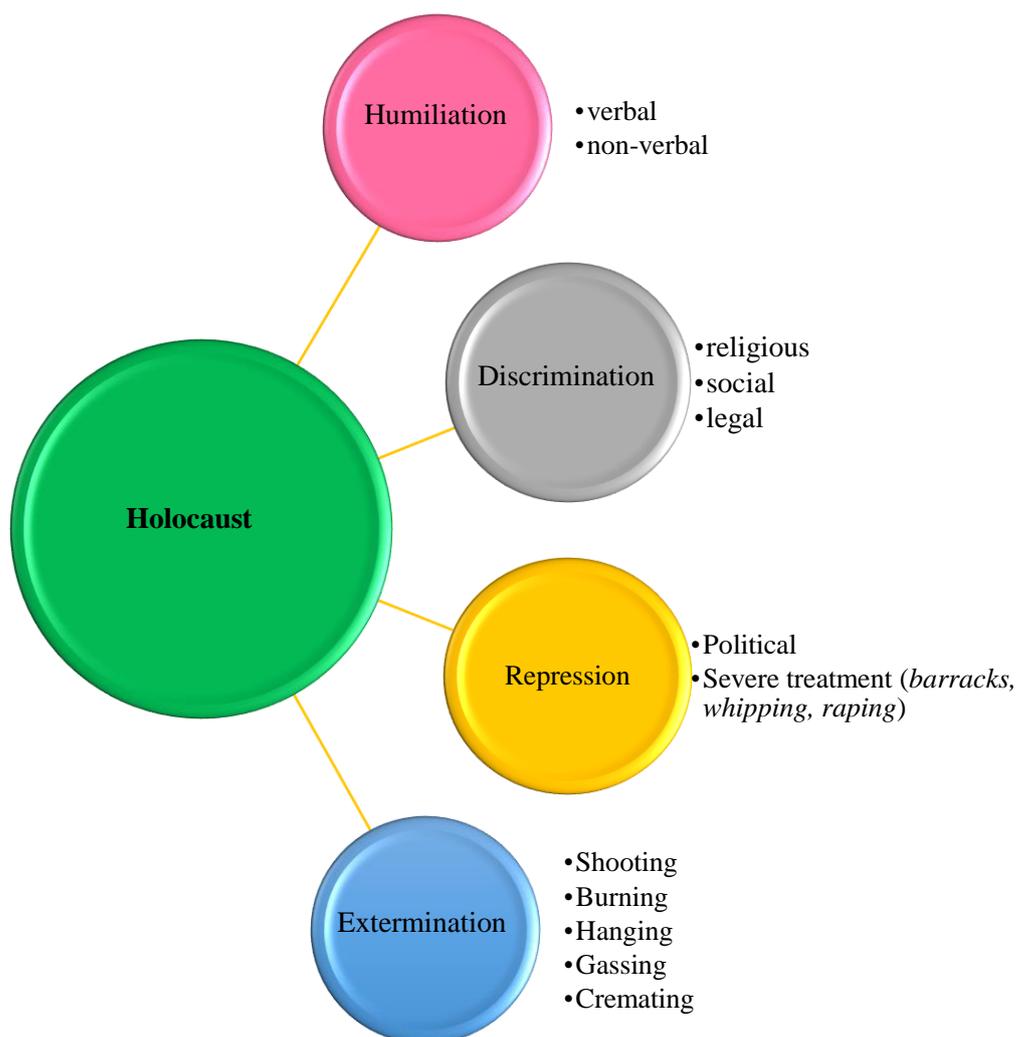


Figure 1. Components of the Holocaust by E. Wiesel

Firstly, *humiliating* as states in Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary [2] is to make someone feel ashamed, lose their respect for themselves, yet, it can be *verbally* as through talking about or making fun of Jews, uttering negative comments which is usually the result of stereotyping are common during Anti-Semitic actions. For instance, "*Faster! Faster! Move, you lazy good-for-nothings!*" [3, p. 19] said Hungarian police, being the first oppressors of Jews of Sighet, and they used to be rather harsh while making Jews leave their houses. On the other hand, German SS

officers always treated Jews as a lower race and used disrespectful words “*Faster, you tramps, you flea-ridden dogs!*” ... “*Faster, you filthy dogs!*” [3, p. 85] This is only the thin edge of the wedge that shows a hatred attitude of Aryans towards Semites who are compared to animals. Furthermore, Night reveals that in concentration camps people from different parts of Europe and with various job occupations from white-collar workers up to blue-collars have been sent only because they have Jewish blood.

In addition to verbal humiliation, there have been a lot of *non-verbal mortifications*. For instance, the musicians — Juliek, “*a Pole with eyeglasses and a cynical smile in a pale face*” and, Louis, “*a native of Holland, a well-known violinist ... are among them. (Germans) would not let him play Beethoven; Jews were not allowed to play German music*” [3, p. 49]. This is truly another form of humiliation, as being a Jew makes those young men feel guilty and disadvantaged from doing favorite job. Depriving the person to do his desired action is out of humanity. However, Juliek succeeds to give the concert yet “*before an audience of the dead and dying*” [3, p. 95] even he perished because of it. He collected all strength and gave all effort in order to perform his last concert before his death. Cellmates found his *trampled, an eerily poignant little corpse* [3, p. 95] with his violin next to him.

Most admittedly, the humiliation is not sufficient for Nazis so that they activate next phase — *discrimination*, which takes many forms, from denying someone a job to segregation, which means separating a person from the rest of society is vividly elaborated by Elie Wiesel.

Discrimination — the practice of unfairly treating because of skin color, religion, sex and, of course, the nation, (given in Merriam-Webster Dictionary) [1] is surely one of the components of the Holocaust in the novel. Jew’s inhabitants of Sighet are told to wear the yellow star on the clothes in order to be quickly identified and it is the first time when they come across discrimination. Additionally, the Wiesels and other Jews encountered *religion discriminating* deeds when they were driven to the synagogue, which was the house of God for Jews, yet where only the name has remained. As the author describes a desecrated altar, the synagogue ruins, he remarks how Jewish tradition, culture and religion are treated by the fascist regime. Jews against their will had to relieve themselves in the place that they considered holy which caused moral harassment. This is another slap into Jews’ faces. Lately, in Birkenau, *social discrimination* has started, in the form of the primary selection which occurs to sort out prisoners into several categories like gender, age, health status. “*Men to the left! Women to the right!*” *Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight simple, short words. Yet that was the moment when I left my mother... I didn’t know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever. I kept walking, my father holding my hand* [3, p. 29]. Jews now confronted with the first but foremost division into male and female. Millions of Jewish families cracked into pieces before and after arrival at the death camps. So did Eliezer, the protagonist and narrator of the Night who as acknowledged by Harold Bloom, [4] being separated from his mother begins his transit through Hell, and the death of his father completes his journey. Elie Wiesel writes, “*I did not know that this was the moment ... and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora (Eliezer’s beloved sister) forever*” [3, p. 29]. Having been separated from his mother, sisters, Elie Wiesel began his first steps to the abyss that finished with his father’s death. This episode of selection, according to Alfred Kazin, an American writer and literary critic, is one of the details...which can be read only with fresh astonishment at the tireless cruelty of the Nazi officers and the unusually merciless action of those who led this vast system of Jew massacre [5, p. 54–57]. The author did not describe how Eliezer’s mother died and did not provide further information about his sisters’ fates, as a reader has enough intuition that the female part of the family was either suffocated in the gas

chamber and turned into ashes in the crematorium or was used for sexual purposes. Yet Wiesel told in the interviews that he reunited with two of his elder sisters, Hilda and Bea, who had also survived after the concentration camps, in an orphanage while living in France.

Furthermore, Germans put all leaders of the Jewish community into prison without any reason and then prohibited them to leave homes under the death penalty. *“The same day... (hey) burns into every Jewish home... (as) a Jew was henceforth forbidden to own gold, jewelry, or any valuable”* [3, p. 10] This *discrimination* carries *legal* character as to do so is considered a disruption of one’s legal right for possession. Jews were not to go to any type of entertainment places; synagogues were closed for them. They had to live in special places — ghettos that were appointed by Germans waiting to begin the Exodus. *“there no longer was any distinction between rich and poor, notables and the others; we were all people condemned to the same fate – still unknown”* [3, p. 21]. This words uttered by the narrator before commencing the journey toward humiliation, torture, grief beyond grief, and death as stated Harold Bloom [6]. Meanwhile, the narrator showed surprise not at the terrible events that had befallen his family and community, but at the naïve responses of the Jews, if we could even say it a response. The nation was unable to resist German officers since officers were ten, hundred times superior in number and cold-blooded toward Jews in the village.

Discriminated people will often be the victims of physical attack. The attack is usually the expression of the anger or resentment that have built up through the first steps of prejudice and the result of repression. The repression against Jews was ascended to the political level. Inspired by Hitler’s massive propaganda machine, many Germans adopted his anti-Semitic beliefs and began openly displaying their prejudice against Jews. Most episodes from Night also prove a circle of violent actions, severe control is especially done by the force in order to accelerate the repression stage.

Primarily, force is used to clean the village from Jews in the novel, so the protagonist Eliezer watches the people of his town — friends, teachers, and the rabbi pass by with a small bundle of possessions. The scene is surreal, like something out of a book about ancient Jewish history — Biblical stories of the Jews fleeing cruel rulers. Eliezer views this deportation through the eyes of someone steeped in the Torah. His religious upbringing helps him link the current trial with a long history of trials faced by the Jews. However, Eliezer’s family is not a part of the first deportation. Instead, they are going to be sent to the smaller ghetto. When it is their time to leave the house, they are ordered to march. Eliezer sees his father cry for the first time. The Hungarian police order them to run, and Eliezer begins to hate them. These tears are the first sign of weakness — a hint that Eliezer’s father may not be able to protect his family. The forces now put against them are too large, too well-armed, too far beyond rational thought. The streets are deserted as if the non-Jews are waiting for the Jews to leave so they can pillage their houses. The next day they are marched to the station and eighty Jews were all trapped into a cattle car as a herd, which moved to an unknown destination for them. The Jews of Sighet have lost a little bit of their humanity, at each step they encountered with repression. They waited in the desecrated remains of what had been their holy place. People, put into the camps, lost everything, which had individuated their personalities as well as their appearance. Their hair was shaved off; they were given numbers and divided into particular classes. The methods of torture included hunger, beating and murder as claims Sabine, the chief archivist at Buchenwald and her husband Harry Stein, a researcher specializing in determining the names and biographies of persons identified in Nazi documents by numbers. *“To die was prisoner’s last duty”*, writes Jean Amery, a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Further, in the camps, those who survived after each selection were treated so severely, as inferior creatures, even death would seem sweeter than it would. SS officers searched for physically strong Jews and

employed them against their nation, against their family, friends, beloved ones. Wiesel noted that those who appeared most strong physically were assigned to work in the crematoria, mentioning Bela Katz, another character, a young man from Sighet who arrived a week earlier, *“had been forced to place his own father’s body into the furnace”* [3, p. 35]. Bloom claims that brutality in the death camps is widespread. In the barracks the inmate Jews, kapos, leaders of the previously brought prisoners met the new inmates with *“sticks in hand, striking anywhere, anyone without reason”* [3, p. 35]. Jews were to live in the barracks, dirty and narrow accommodation, lack of sanitary facilities, which had *“no floor ... A roof and four walls. (their) feet sank into the mud”* [3, p. 38]. Prisoners were ordered to be bare and sleep standing, some collapsed sliding into the mud and were punished for disobedience. Moreover, the sexual predation of boys is another example of the inhumane treatment of the Jewish prisoners by those who had power over them. Wiesel wrote that some of the German camp administrators used young boys to indulge their pedophilic desires. On the other hand, some Jews assigned by Nazis in charge of others instead of helping inmates assisted in act of repression and betrayed the trust of the Jews. Franek, a foreman at Buna, noticed gold tooth in Eliezer demands to own it, When Eliezer refuses, Franek begins his campaign to get Eliezer’s gold crown by brutalizing his father as he has already known Eliezer’s Achilles heel is his father, giving him daily beatings since the old man is unable to walk. Finally, Wiesel agrees to handle the tooth to Franek. Another example is Idek, who at his worst when given power over a group of people treats them like animals. Idek brings the entire unit to the warehouse even though there is no work that day so that he could rape Polish girls. Eliezer heard sounds coming from a side room and accidentally became a witness of the incident. Later, Idek gives twenty-five lashes with a whip in front of all prisoners, including Eliezer’s father who watches, yet stays helplessly. Such repressive deeds breed another, and circle never rounds up as it is already saturated with the world’s silence.

Humiliation, discrimination, repression finalized the last stage that is extermination in full sense which together with the previously mentioned stages are components of the phenomenon of the Holocaust. Annihilating the whole nation with any possible methods was the main purpose of the Nazi’s. Night exhibits various examples of mass extermination of the Jews as shooting, burning, hanging, gassing, cremating that sometimes difficult to visualize in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the very beginning of the novel foreign Jews were headed toward the forest and the Gestapo men *“without passion or haste ... shot (them, as they) approach the trench one by one and offer their necks. Infants were tossed into air and used as targets for the machine guns”* [3, p. 6]. Then Madame Schächter, a madwoman from Sighet, cries as if she sees fire, burning furnaces before the train arrives at Auschwitz. People in the train beat her, bind and gag her, but when the train stops at Auschwitz everybody becomes motionless and speechless, as *“in front of (them), those flames. In the air, the smell of burning flesh”* [3, p. 28]. Probably nothing could prepare Eliezer for what he saw there. Madame Schächter, in her madness, was the only one who foresaw the inhuman reality of what awaited them. The new prisoners cannot imagine the inhuman cruelty that they are about to face, and so enter the concentration camp peacefully. The veteran prisoners know better. One of the prisoners begins to curse the new arrivals for coming, anything, even suicide will be better, he says. He cannot believe the new have not heard by 1944 what happens at Auschwitz. Pointing to the chimney, he cries, *“over there, that’s where they will take you. Over there will be your grave. You still didn’t understand? You sons of bitches! You will be burned! Burned to a cinder! Turned into ashes!”* [3, p. 31]. However, it was too late to protest, Jews had already come to their last destination. If something wrong happens, it will be accepted as sabotage and it will serve as a good chance to slaughter several Jews, survived the selection. Once one of the pipels, a young boy who is

a servant to an Oberkapo and often sexual partner, suspects in organizing sabotage. A pipel was arrested, tortured and finally sentenced to the death penalty, standing in the shadows of the gallows even the executioner refused to hang him, as pipel was too young and innocent. He did not die shortly after the chair was pulled out from under his legs. *“he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before (prisoners’ eyes)”* [3, p. 65].

Such trials that the narrator faced *totally changed* him. A boy who prayed three times daily, longing for studying holy and mystic Hebrew so that to be as near as possible to God being witnessed all atrocities of *Holocaust* from the first night at the death camp felt anger and disapproval towards Divinity. *“Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?”* [3, p. 31]. This extract vividly demonstrates the transformation of Eliezer at all levels, for instance, in thoughts, in soul and reality. Gary Henry, the minister who works on a part-time basis with the Broadmoor Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, highlights that in Night “the young faith of the Hasid is devoured in the fires of the crematoria. *God dies*, and Wiesel’s life is cursed ...” [7]. Not only Eliezer transformed, but some other characters in Night also changed. For example, the son of Rabbi Eliahu left his father deliberately in the crowd, when the father lost the ground, sliding to the rear of the column during the evacuation from Buna. The son wanted to get rid of his father in order to increase the possibility of his survival as long as possible. Another the most devastating example of the breakdown occurs in the cattle cars going to Buchenwald during the final phase of the journey. Some workers amuse themselves by throwing pieces of bread into the open wagons and watching the starved men kill each other for a crumb. Eliezer sees an old man about to eat a bit of the bread as someone has thrown it upon him and starts beating him. That person will be an old man’s son, the son grabs the bread from his father’s fist; the father collapses, murmurs and then dies. Ellen S. Fine, a professor of French at Kingsborough Community College, acknowledges that Wiesel having witnessed fathers beaten, abandoned, and killed, “through the narrator has chosen to represent *the son’s betrayal of the father* and perhaps has omitted situations in which the fathers mistreat the son” [8]. The author according to E. S. Fine protects father’s image and honors his memory. Yet, the survival instinct has overtaken Elie Wiesel in the face of his dying father. When a guard tells him that in the camp, *“there is no such thing as father, brother, friend. Each of us lives and dies alone. Let me give you good advice: stop giving your ration of bread and soup to your old father. You cannot help him anymore. And you are hurting yourself”* [3, p. 110], he thinks in his innermost heart that the guard is right but does not dare admit it. However, after the death of his father just a little before the liberation, Wiesel’s life is devoid of meaning. Night concludes with the episode of the author looking at himself in the mirror. He writes: *“a corpse gazed at me. The look in his eyes as they stared into mine has never left me”* [3, p. 115]. The author made a reader subconsciously juxtapose the previous and the last image of the boy who went through trials and death due to indifference and abandonments of both Jews and non-Jews.

Jews crying out in despair, cursing themselves for being naïve, immature as children and not foreseeing the nightmare. Unfortunately, Jews of Sighet ignored the warnings several times. Once foreign Jews were to be expelled from Sighet, so was Moishe the Beadle, the handyman, caretaker at the Hasidic synagogue, mentor of the protagonist. The train took them far away. After several months, Moishe was back, yet he changed and became another Moishe. Gestapo made foreign Jews dig trenches in the forest that would serve as a grave for them. It was a miracle that Moishe could survive so that to spread information about the incident in the forest. Nonetheless, townspeople, neighborhood villages mocked at Moishe Beadle for creating nonsense. Jews were so lazy to believe in; they were too confident the war would be terminated soon. At this point, the author

foreshadows for upcoming brutality and inhumanity by the Nazi regime. Another signal was given by the family friend — Moishe Chaim Berkowitz, who had come from a capital where Anti-Semitic acts had already taken towards Jews that made a situation tenser. Ignoring both Moishes' warnings Sighet Jews faced repression, brutality, etc. Not only for the Wiesels but also all Jews around the town, true horror began in 1944, nearly at the end of the Second World War. Alternative offers for leaving Sighet had been made by friends of Eliezer's father, however, Shlomo rejected them, and this probably was his main mistake that marked his all-family members' fate. In addition, being one of the respectable figures in Sighet community, distinguished with his intelligence, could not estimate the current situation, which led his close people to death camps. Wiesel uses irony when he speaks of the way Jews responded to the lot prepared for them. No one in fact, thought at all or even had left the "instinct" for "self-preservation", or "self-defense" or "pride". They had become "souls condemned to wander ... until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion, without any hope of finding" [9, p. 459–464]. That is, they had come to reside in Hell. Nevertheless, he does not use irony to describe the evil perpetrated on the Jews' suffering.

### Conclusions

Night can be considered in the center of all the author has written since. As novel autobiographical, it shows the author's unique understanding of hell, his feeling as a victim and the survivor, explain of the concept Holocaust which consists of some sub notions, like humiliation, discrimination, repression and extermination. The narrator, incredibly, within the depths of the Holocaust universe, find the will to live. And to live so, in order to carry the message of such a crime to the next generation, in order to avoid reoccurrence of history.

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