

RESEARCH ARTICLE

HOLOCAUST LITERATURE: THE VOICE OF THE SIX MILLION VICTIMS

---

MR. Subodh Kishor Kshetre,

Principal,

MIT VGS and Junior College, Ahmednagar.

Postal Address: 'SaflyaNiwas', Kanade Mala. Near Vrindavan Colony, Sarasnagar,  
Ahmednagar- 414001, Maharashtra.

---

**Abstract:**

Holocaust is the darkest chapter of our world history. This is a tragic event which demands to be remembered. Holocaust literature gives a voice to the six million victims perished in the inhumane, tragic event of Holocaust and relates us with their misery, trauma and survivals. This article aims to study the Holocaust literature, its background and significance. The author tries to explain the meaning of 'Holocaust' using different definitions given by scholars and also discusses the background and actual events happened in it. The definition of 'Holocaust Literature' given by different authors and critics is also discussed in this article. Thereafter the author tries to discuss the Holocaust literature at a glance. The author also discusses the Holocaust literature written in different languages and in different countries as well as he discusses the same by categorizing it into the different periods and genres.

Later, in the next part of the article, author tries to explain the contribution of women writers and discusses the difference

between the views and survivals of Men and women authors. The stories of women prisoners are more horrible than men. Holocaust literature does not only consist of the plight of European Jewry, concentration camps, deaths and misery but also the accounts of resistance, rescue and heroism. This article also discusses the view of perpetrators and the works written by Non-Jewish authors. Some people negate the Holocaust and try to prove it exaggerated. This holocaust denial is also explained in short with few examples. Holocaust Literature's significance, literary and historical value, and need of research are discussed at the end of the article. Holocaust Literature always warns us against hatred, racism and fascism as well as encourages us to have faith and patience in any situation. It reminds us – 'Every cloud has a silver lining.'

**Key words:**

Holocaust, Holocaust Literature, Holocaust denial, Survival, Trauma, Perpetrators.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Women's Holocaust literature,  
Concentration Camps, European Jews.

**Introduction:**

'For weeks I've lived in here,  
Penned up inside this ghetto.  
But I have found what I love here.  
The dandelions call to me  
And the white chestnut branches in the  
court,  
Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.  
Butterflies don't live here,  
In the ghetto<sup>I</sup>.<sup>(1)</sup>

There were no butterflies, no joyful chirping of birds; the sun rises with the new hope of liberation and life and night falls with the darkness of death. This was a place where people used to think-"If you wake up in the morning, it is a good day."<sup>II(2)</sup>The world was like a trap for you. There was no hope for life because it was the period of Holocaust. Then how can anyone sing a song for butterfly, in a horrible place like Terezin concentration camp? <sup>III</sup>

It is easier to torture and defeat the human body but the human spirit, thoughts and voice of innocent victims are invincible. One can certainly feel this while reading any work of Holocaust literature. This article aims to have a brief study of the Holocaust literature, its background and the

overall canon as well as importance and need of research. Let us begin with the background of Holocaust and Holocaust literature.

**(A) What is Holocaust?** : According to the 'Merriam-Webster Dictionary' the term Holocaust is listed as a noun, which means- (1) A sacrifice consumed by fire. (2) A thorough destruction involving extensive loss of life especially through fire (3) The mass slaughter of European civilians and especially Jews by the Nazis during World War II

The etymology of the word Holocaust is also given there. The word holocaust is derived from a Latin word 'holocaustum' which is come from the Greek word 'holokaustos'. The Greek word 'holokaustos' is formed from two words- Hol- Whole +Kaustos- Burnt. <sup>(3)</sup>

There are two terms used in Hebrew and Yiddish<sup>IV</sup> for Holocaust. These are -

- 1) Sho'ah(Hebrew. Meaning: Catastrophe) and
- 2) Hurban (Hebrew and Yiddish. Meaning: Destruction).

The Germans called it as 'the final solution to the Jewish question.'<sup>(4)</sup>

Let's see some proper definitions of Holocaust –

- 1) According to the Britannica, Encyclopaedia- Holocaust is the systematic state-sponsored killing of

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

six million Jewish men, women, and children and millions of others by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II.<sup>(5)</sup>

- 2) The definition of Holocaust given by Madhura, A S in her thesis- 'The inter personal relationships of holocaust survivors in the works of Nava Semel and Thane Rosenbaum' as 'the bureaucratic state sponsored mass killing was also had its collaborators.... The ruling party (*Nazi*)<sup>V</sup> treated the Jews as a threat to their existence as a community belonging to the German race. This was not restricted to the Jews as the age of the Holocaust was times when the Nazis persecuted other groups which in their opinion were "racially superior".<sup>(6)</sup>

- 3) Niewek and Nicosia state: Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state sponsored persecution and mass murder or genocide of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. It began with the rise of Hitler and Nazis to power in Weimer Germany in the years prior to World War II. <sup>(7)</sup>

Anti-Semitism was at the root of the Holocaust and so called 'Final solution' executed by Nazi Germany. There is a long history of anti-Semitism in Asia and Europe. Adolf Hitler had come in the power with the idea of Master Aryan race and anti-Semitism. Nazi Germany had declared the Aryan race as the master and pure race and planned a state sponsored program of the persecution and murder of the subordinate races like: Jews, Roma Gypsies as well as others who did not fit for Nazi regime like: Homosexuals, Communists, followers of Jehovah's Witness, disabled persons etc. So, the holocaust is not only limited to the persecution of European Jewry but also includes the persecution of Roma Gypsies, Homosexual men, mentally and physically disabled people, communists and Jehovah's Witnesses. But the Holocaust had affected more to the European Jews than others as six million Jews had perished in this inhumane program.

Nazi Germany had sent these subordinate people to the different concentration camps to perish. Many of them had perished in the gas chambers and burnt in the crematorium furnaces. Nazi Germany had tried to keep this as the top secret and left very few evidences behind but the Holocaust literature and testimonials of the survivals have uncovered these demonic acts and brought forward the truth of Holocaust in front of the world.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**(B) Holocaust Literature:**

The different definitions of Holocaust Literature are as follows:

- 1) According to the Encyclopedia of Holocaust: ‘Holocaust literature is the testimony, that gropes to war community in the wake of radical assault on the vary substance of community. This literature attests that a human being, even and especially after the sho’ah is homo narrans, struggling to tale that defies telling even as it compels the writer to bear witness.’<sup>(8)</sup>
- 2) Reference guide to Holocaust Literature, Vol. I defines it as – ‘In its broader sense Holocaust literature consists of all the literary responses to the destruction of European Jewry and other people by the German Nazi state and its collaborators during World War II.’<sup>(9)</sup>
- 3) Gerald Levin : The Literature of the Holocaust is usually discussed as a class of literature defined by its subject – the destruction of European Jewry by Germany, chiefly in the years between 1942 and 1945 – and not by its form.<sup>(10)</sup>

Famous Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel had stated –“If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet,

our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.”<sup>(11)</sup> This statement clearly shows the difference between Holocaust literature and other literature. Holocaust literature is a testimony against the world’s most heinous crime. It is the voice of six million victims, murdered, burnt and buried cold headedly.

Wiesel had also said that- ‘A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka.’<sup>(12)</sup>This statement has a deep meaning. Treblinka concentration camp symbolises power is the sole reality. Literature becomes onlya propaganda when power is the sole reality. So, a novel about Treblinka is either not a novel (as the purpose of Holocaust literature is not a mere entertainment) or not about Treblinka (if it doesn’t portraying the truth).

Holocaust literature is not only the literature of trauma, agony and suffering but also a literature of hope, survival, bravery and heroism. Though it tells about the darkest period of world history, it always encourages the readers to live their life to the fullest.

**Holocaust Literature- At a glance:**

We will have a quick view and a general summary of Holocaust literature

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

in this part of our research article. Jew community was spread all over in the European continent. There were Jews with different languages and nationalities at the time of World War II and Holocaust. So, obviously the victims were from different countries, backgrounds and with different languages. So, first of all let's have a quick view of the Holocaust literature written in different languages and in different countries.

**A. Holocaust Literature in different languages:** The most famous Holocaust author Elie Wiesel has written his most famous novel 'Night' originally in Yiddish but published it in French in 1958 as *La Nuit*. Another famous Holocaust work-'The Whole Land Brimstone' was also written in French by Anna Langfus. Romain Gary, Jean-Francois Steiner, Henry Raczymov and Andre Schwarz-Bart, etc. are some of the important French Holocaust writers.

German writers avoided Holocaust themes till the end of 1980. In 1990s many literary work about the Holocaust published in German. Bernard Schlink's 'The Reader' and Paul Celan's 'To desfuge' are some famous works on Holocaust written in German.

Polish Literature devoted greater attention to the theme of Holocaust. Major figures in Polish Holocaust literature are Janusz Korczak and Ida Fink. 'This way to Gas Ladies and Gentlemen' is also an important work written by Polish author Tadeusz Borowski.

Many Jew authors of Israel have written important works on Holocaust. Their works are mainly written in Hebrew. Poets like Dan Pagis, Abba Kovner, Yakov Basser, etc. have written poetry on the horror of Holocaust. Playwrights like Motti Lerner, Yehoshua Sobol handled the Holocaust themes in their dramas. Best-selling authors of Israel including Dan Ben Amotz, David Grossman, Haim Guri, vyon Liebrecht, Aharon Meged, Uri Orlev, Amos Oz, Yehiel Dinur , Aharon Appelfled, etc. have written about the Holocaust. There are some works written in Yiddish. The flourishing of modern Yiddish literature was halted by the holocaust. 'in Harts fun Gehenem' written by Zalman Gradowski is a well known example of Yiddish Holocaust literature.

Primo Levi is the most famous Italian Holocaust writer, well known for his books 'If This Is

RESEARCH ARTICLE

a Man' and 'The Periodic Table.'

Giorgio Bassani, Giacomo De Benedetti, Louis Goldman, etc. have written on Holocaust in Italian. Anne Frank had written her diary in Dutch, which is one of the most famous works of Holocaust Literature. There is a significant body of Holocaust literature written in European languages like: Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Finnish and Greek.

There are many authors in English who have written on Holocaust and World War II. Famous Works of Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and other Holocaust authors are translated into English. Many best-selling authors Jews and Non-Jews have contributed in this field. John Hersey, Bernard Malamud, Lewis Wallant, Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow, William Styron, etc. have used the Holocaust and Nazi Concentration Camps as a theme in their work.

**B. Holocaust Literature in different genres:** Holocaust literature consists of different genres. There are many non-fiction works as letters; memoirs, diaries etc. are written on the event of Holocaust. The diary of a Young Girl written by Anne

Frank, Flinker's 'Young Moshe's Diary', Korczak's 'Ghetto Diary', etc. are few examples of famous non-fiction works of Holocaust literature. Holocaust fictions like- Novels, novellas and short stories are widely read by the readers of different backgrounds. There is a huge list of Holocaust fictions, starts from Elie Wiesel's 'Night'(1958) to Australian author Heather Morris's 'The tattooist of Auschwitz'(2018), still many fiction writers, Jews and Non-Jews are writing works on Holocaust and Nazi concentration camps. There are many plays written on the theme of Holocaust. According to Robert Skloot- 'Playwrights did not begin to describe and interpret the Holocaust experience until a decade after the end of World War II. The most influential and lasting effort was the 1956 adaptation of *Anne Frank's Diary of a Young Girl* by two Hollywood screenwriters, Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett...The country's most affected by the Holocaust tended to produce plays reflecting localized cultural and political concerns; these changed over time with the emergence of new knowledge of atrocities and new assumptions about their causes and effects.'<sup>(13)</sup>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Charlotte Delbo's 'Who will carry the word' (1974), Jean-Claude Grumberg's play 'The Workroom' (1979), Rolf Hochhuth in 'The Deputy' (1963), Peter Weiss in 'The Investigation' (1965), and Thomas Bernhard's *Eve of Retirement* (1979) are some examples of the plays on holocaust theme. Poets like Paul Celan, Martin Niemöller and Nelly Sachs, etc. had written poems on Holocaust and Concentration camps. Native American writer Sherman Alexie negotiates various comparative perspectives on the Holocaust in his poems 'The games between the Jews and the Indians Is tied going into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning' (1993), and 'Inside Dachau' (1996).

**C. New Engagements in Holocaust Literature:** After 1980s, Authors who are non-Jewish with no personal connection with Holocaust started writing in first person narrative about Holocaust and Concentration camps. Many new techniques are applied by authors of new engagements in their work related to the Jewish Holocaust. Like: Bernard Schlink's 'The Reader' and Jonathan Littell's 'The Kindly Ones' and John Boyne's 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' are the novels written on Holocaust

and its victims from the perspective of perpetrators.

**Contribution of Women writer:**

Women's experiences and survivals were different than men. Critics have begun to analyse Holocaust literature on the basis of gender from 1980s. Holocaust literature written by men has portrayed the women with peripheral and limited roles. But the women writing on Holocaust opens a new door of women centred narratives and also focuses on the sufferings of women, who are the most oppressed victims of Holocaust.

Horowitz, Sarah explains the difference between the Holocaust literature written by Men and women in these words- 'These literary representations grapple with the philosophical, psychological and cultural implications of the Holocaust. While most literature written by male survivors places women at the periphery, most women's literature focuses on women, highlighting both the commonality and difference in Jewish men's and women's experiences.'<sup>(14)</sup>

Let's take an example of 'The diary of a Young Girl' written by Anne Frank. A reader can feel her stress on universe rather than limited view on Jew community. It is filled with optimism, faith and philosophy of life. We can feel it with the following extract from her diary as an example-

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I'll be able to realize them!” (*The Diary of a Young Girl*, eds. Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, p. 332)

Her writing not lead us to despair but to the greatness of humanity and human spirit.

Gender specific themes focus on Sexual exploitation, motherhood and childbirth. We can take the example of latest Holocaust work of women writer Heather Morris in her novels- ‘The tattooist of Auschwitz’ and ‘Cilka’s Journey.’ The sexual exploitation of a Jew prisoner Cilka by Nazi officer is portrayed in these novels. Ilona Karmel’s novel ‘An Estate of Memory’ deals with the story of secret

pregnancy of a Jewish prisoner in a concentration camp. Cynthia Ozick’s novella ‘The Shawl’ focuses on a mother’s story that tried and failed to protect her infant from death in a labour camp.

According to Horowitz, Sarah- ‘ A central hypothesis that has emerged in scholarly interpretations of women’s Holocaust literature is the idea that women endured the hardships of concentration camps by forming surrogate families, bonding with and supporting one another, while men survived by competing with other men for scarce resources. While many works by women do give evidence of such cooperation, the differences may be less notable than first supposed.’<sup>(15)</sup>

There are many other women writers have contributed in Holocaust literature with different themes and views but it is impossible to summaries them all in a single article. Thus, it can be said that the women contribution in Holocaust literature is as important as the writing by men authors.

**Holocaust Denial:**

Attempt to negate the established facts of the Nazi genocide of European Jewry is described as the Holocaust denial. A group of people denies the official/state sponsored policy of the persecution and mass murders of subordinate races, people and specially Jews. They denies the existence of the poison gas chambers for

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

killing in the concentration camp of Auschwitz Birkenau and considers the figure of six million murders of Jews as an exaggeration. According to them the deaths at these camps happened due to the diseases and starvation. In many European countries, Holocaust denial is considered as a crime but in USA it is not illegal due to the freedom of speech.

In 1955, a group named 'liberty Lobby' founded by Willis Carto in Washington DC. This group advocated a racial pure United States and blamed American Jewry for problems. The Liberty lobby had begun to publish Holocaust denial literature in 1969. Some examples of Holocaust denial Literature are: 'Cross and the Flag' by Gerald L K Smith, 'The drama of European Jewry' by Paul Rassimer, 'Die Gaskammaerluege' by Wolfgang Frolich, etc.

**Importance of Holocaust Literature:**

"Ask now and see, was there ever such a holocaust as this since the days of Adam?"<sup>(16)</sup>

Elie Wiesel writes in one of his article, "Auschwitz represents the negation and failure of human progress; it negates the human design and casts doubt on its validity. Then it defeated culture; later it defeated art, because just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz. No one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz. The truth of Auschwitz remains

hidden in its ashes"<sup>(17)</sup> If the writing in Holocaust literature would stop, It will be a huge injustice with those innocent six millions human beings whose lives were ended due to the fake idea of Super race and fanaticism. Spivy, Tyler Gray has explained the importance of Holocaust literature in his research paper in these words- "To let Holocaust fiction die would be let the Holocaust die, and that must never happen... Even if Holocaust fiction ethically dubious or waters down the effects of the Holocaust, the fact remains that the genre is thriving and is needed."<sup>(18)</sup>

Millions of people had brutally murdered with cold head. What was there fault? They were innocent. Jews, Roma Gypsies, Homosexual men, Jehovah's Witnesses, communists, Disabled people were secretly executed and cold headedly murdered. Some of them were murdered in poisoned gas chambers and burnt into crematoriums. Nazi Germany tattooed them like cattle and had denied a chance to live their lives. Their Civil rights, their Human rights and ultimately their lives were progressively and legally relegated to non-human status.

Josephin Patricia Sukanya C. explains the importance of holocaust literature in her thesis as -"The horrific truths of the Holocaust still remain buried in its ashes. But to allow it to remain so would be akin to perpetuating the felony

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

done to the Six Million murdered. The murdered Six Million cannot be left buried in mere statistic archives. Their trauma has to be understood, felt, remembered and memorialized. And of all literary expressions, testimonial literature has become the apotheosis of Holocaust representation. These paradigmatic testimonial narratives, serve both as a vindication of the Holocaust survivors' inordinate pain and suffering and as a memorial to the Six Million victims who were butchered brutally."<sup>(19)</sup>

A Polish Jewish socialist politician SzmulZ ygielbojm who committed suicide to protest the inaction of the western Allies against the Holocaust has appealed in his suicide letter-“By my death, I wish to express the strongest possible protest against the positivity with which the world watches and allows the annihilation of the Jewish people.”<sup>(20)</sup>

To neglect the Holocaust is to neglect the Humanism, Justice and Human rights, hence the study and writing of Holocaust literature is very important for every literature lover. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the impact of Holocaust literature is so great that its study has become a staple course at many universities and Colleges in country like USA. However, there is very few research is done in the field of Holocaust Literature in India. Still there are many topics and aspects of

Holocaust literature in which the research is needed. For example: History of Holocaust and Holocaust Literature, Gender theory, Psychoanalysis and trauma theory, Women's study, etc. Hope, the students of literature may have research in these fields and topics related to Holocaust literature and give the voice to the six million victims of Holocaust who killed silently and still waiting for justice and remembrance from our generation.

**Notes:**

- I. Ghetto:** A quarter of a city in which Jews were formerly required to live.
- II.** A quote from the novel “The Tattooist of Auschwitz” written by Morris, Heather from the real Lale Sokolov (Protagonist of the novel). This is the motto Lale lived his life by after escaping the horrors of Auschwitz.
- III. Terezin concentration camp:** A hybrid concentration camp and ghetto established by Nazis during the Word War II in Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, a German occupied region of Czechoslovakia.
- IV. Yiddish:** a High German language written in Hebrew characters that is spoken by Jews and descendants of Jews of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

central and eastern European origin.

- V. (*Nazi*) is not a part of the original quote. It is given by the author of this article for explanation.

References

- Volavkova, Hana. ed. " I never saw a butterfly: Children's Drawings and poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942-1944", expanded second edition. New York: Schocken Books, 1933.
- Morris, Heather. "The tattooist of Auschwitz." Bonnier Books UK, 2018.
- Merriam Webster Dictionary. "Holocaust." [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/holocaust?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsonld](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/holocaust?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld). Accessed 8 May 2021.
- (Berenbaum, Michael. "Holocaust". Encyclopedia Britannica, 22 Oct. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Holocaust>. Accessed 8 May 2021.
- Ibid.
- Madhura, A. S. "The inter personal relationships of holocaust survivors in the works of Nava Semel and Thane Rosenbaum." University of Mysore, 2017.
- Gaur, Avantika, "The Other Side of The Holocaust A Critical Study of Selected Holocaust Fiction." Mohan Lal Sukhadia University, 2018.
- Patterson, David, Berger, Alan L, Cargas, Sarita. "Introduction." Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature. Oryx Press, 2002.
- Riggs, Thomas. "Introduction." Reference guide to Holocaust literature Volume I. St. James Press, 2002, p. xxxi.
- Levin, Gerald. "Holocaust Literature as a genre; A description and a bibliography." Journal of Social Philosophy, Vol. 13, Issue 3, pp. 52-69.
- Elie, Dawidowicz, Lucy S., Rabinowitz, Dorothy, Brown, Robert. "Dimensions of the Holocaust." Northwestern University Press. 1977.
- Patterson, David, Berger, Alan L, Cargas, Sarita. "Introduction." Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature. Oryx Press, 2002.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Skloot, Robert. "Holocaust Representation: Drama." Holocaust Theatre Catalogue.[https://htc.miami.edu/holocaust-representation-drama/Holocaust Representation: Drama \(miami.edu\)](https://htc.miami.edu/holocaust-representation-drama/Holocaust_Representation_Drama_(miami.edu)) Accessed 8 May 2021.

Horowitz, Sara R. "Holocaust Literature." Jewish Women's Library.<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/holocaust-literature>, Accessed 8 May 2021.

Ibid.

Roskies, David G. "The Holocaust According to the Literary Critics." <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/161442482.pdf>, Accessed 8 May 2021.

Spivey, Tyler Grey. "The coldness of Hell: A theoretical reading of Holocaust fiction and the Holocaust as the deconstructive event." Southeastern University, 2017.

Ibid.

Josephin, Patricia Sukanya C. "A Study of Repositioning and Reconstructing Identities as a Dialogic Continuum in the Select Works of Second Generation Holocaust Life Writing." Bharathidasan University, 2017.<http://hdl.handle.net/10603/211041>

Engelking, Barbara. "The Legacy of Holocaust." Holocaust and Memory. Leicester University Press, 2001.p.304.