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## **TRAUMA REPRESENTATION: AN ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM STYRON'S *SOPHIE'S CHOICE***

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***Abstract:***

*Trauma emerged as an academic discipline only in the late nineteenth century. William Styron in his masterpiece Sophie's Choice effectively employs the trauma of holocaust experience. Styron's female protagonist Sophie Zawistowska is a beautiful Polish woman who survived Auschwitz physically but could never save her psyche from the haunting memories of her past. This study is an attempt to analyze Sophie's psyche in the light of the trauma studies as an academic discipline.*

*Key Words: Trauma, Auschwitz, Guilt, Death, Suicide, Sex*

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Trauma Studies emerged as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century. "Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster" ([www.apa.org/topics/trauma/](http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/)). Psychological trauma results in long term negative consequences. Though trauma was discussed by psychoanalysts like Freud and Janet, it came to the forefront of psychoanalytical studies only in relation with Vietnam War. The traumatic experiences of the Vietnam veterans resulted in the identification of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a clinical diagnosis. Cathy Caruth, one of the most prominent scholars of Trauma Studies explains that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may occur in the form of "...repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event"(Caruth 4). Trauma of holocaust survivors has been a much discussed trope in literary circles. William Styron's Sophie's choice is about the traumatic experiences of a young Polish woman, Sophie Zawistowska. The novel is narrated by Stingo, an American novelist. While in New York, he befriends a couple, Sophie and Nathan who appears to be in a turbulent relationship. As the plot unwinds he realizes the real reason behind the present day behaviour of Sophie. Sophie was forced by a Nazi doctor to choose between which of her children would continue to live while the other has to go to the gas chamber.

Auschwitz has no comparison. This fact itself led partially to the controversy behind Sophie's Choice. The text was not something which was experienced by Styron. The critics were of the view that something terrible like Auschwitz could not be represented truly by a person who has not experienced it. However Sophie's Choice came to be regarded as one of the prominent texts dealing with holocaust. The representations of holocaust survivors in literature and film are usually associated with certain themes such as guilt, loss of faith and physical degradation. Guilt, specifically survivor's guilt, could be simply because of surviving while others perished in the holocaust or due to the actions which they are forced to

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commit in order to survive. The second theme is loss of faith. The experiences they underwent during holocaust made it impossible to believe in the concept of a God. Finally, there is the theme of physical degradation. The survivor tries to wash away his or her past by destroying themselves through unrestrained sexuality or alcoholism or suicide (Kremer). These recurring themes are effectively employed in *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron. Stingo, the budding Southern writer soon develops a passion for the Polish beauty, Sophie Zawistowska. Though he is excited by her beauty, he is intrigued by the "strange quality of her body, "the sickish plasticity...of one who has suffered severe emaciation and whose flesh is even now in the last stages of being restored" (Styron 58). Very gradually, Stingo comes to know of Sophie's past. Since the choice is delved beneath so many layers of other memories, Stingo has no choice but wade through it. Sophie narrates her story to Stingo at different intervals of their relationship. As their relationship grows stronger, she comes up with the horrifying details of her past. The introduction of Nathan and Sophie is made to Stingo initially when he happens to overhear their passionate sex. Soon after this, he meets them in person and is thoroughly intrigued by their on and off turbulent relationship. He is fascinated by the brilliance of Nathan who claims to be a Biologist working for Pfizer. Nathan and Sophie are madly in love with each other with occasional spells of violence from the part of Nathan who blames her for infidelity to him. Though the violence from Nathan is terrifying to onlookers, Sophie seems to understand Nathan well and is ready to wait till Nathan's loving self returns. Sophie's unrestrained sexuality with Nathan and submissiveness can be analyzed in the context of her desire of physical degradation. Sophie herself admits that sex often made it possible for her to forget her terrible past.

"And we made love all afternoon, which made me forget the pain, but forget God too, and Jan, and all the other things I had lost"(362). While narrating her past, Sophie willingly talks about her failed attempts to commit suicide after her release from Auschwitz. She says that she tried to commit suicide inside a Lutheran church while she was in a centre for displaced persons. She wanted to commit suicide inside a church to challenge the God who turned His back on her when she needed Him the most. "...after Auschwitz, I didn't believe in God or if He existed. I would say to myself: he has turned His back on me. And if He has turned His back on me, then I hate Him so that to show and prove my hatred I would commit the greatest sacrilege I could think of. Which is, I would commit my suicide in His church, on sacred ground"(428-29) Since Sophie was brought up as a devout Christian, it is easier to understand why she considers suicide as the gravest sacrilege she can commit against God. The themes of physical degradation and loss of faith in *Sophie's Choice* can be easily fused together. Sophie's life in Auschwitz left her severely malnourished that her entire metabolism changed drastically and her doctor warned her to be cautious about eating food that may tire her metabolism. Though she says that she tried to be cautious about her diet, she herself admits that her critical condition excited her to a great extent. Her weak body became so clumsy that she even forgot to do the basic things. However her encounter with Nathan saves her from this predilection and with his help she regains her health. However the traces of an affinity towards death can be observed throughout their relationship. Sophie and Nathan's adventurous parachute jump at Coney Island can be regarded as their fascination for death. While Stingo chooses to stay behind, Sophie exhilarates in the act of such a suicidal jump. Sophie's obsession with death becomes once again apparent when she tries to drown herself at Jones Beach soon after Nathan deserts her. When Stingo saves her, she shouts at him, "Why didn't you let me die! Why didn't you let me drown? I've been so bad- I've been so awful bad! Why didn't you let me drown?"( 381). It is obvious that her attempts to commit suicide are not just the acts of a lovelorn lady. As the novel progresses, we realize that Sophie is haunted by her guilty consciousness. Even her suicide pact with her schizophrenic lover Nathan Landau underlines this aspect. At the earlier stages of novel, we see Sophie talking about this suicide pact as something ordinary that can be expected out of a passionate relationship. Though Stingo tried to avert this, at the end, Nathan and Sophie make sure that they were true to their pact. Sophie's loss of faith made the contemplation of suicide easier to her. Her comments on several occasions make it clear that it is impossible to be a believer after one's life in Auschwitz. It is revealed for the first time in her conversation with a Jewish woman who survived holocaust like Sophie. " I once believed in Christ and

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His Holy Mother too, but now after these years i was like those Jews who think God was gone forever”.(94) “ I just knew that only a God, only a Jesus who had no pity and who no longer care for me could permit the people I loved to be killed and let me live with such guilt”.(94) The death of Jan and Eva, Sophie's children, in Auschwitz was instrumental in the obliteration of God and religion. Throughout the war time, Sophie restrained from helping the resistance armies so that it won't damage the chances of her children's survival. Irrespective of all her efforts, Sophie was forced to choose which of her children is to die first so that the other one can survive. The final choice left Sophie with a conscious that could never forgive itself. She could hear the voice of Dr. Jemand von Niemand ringing in her ears. “You may keep one of your children. The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?”(507) “You're a Polack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege-a choice”.(508) She chose her little girl Eva to be the one to be perished in the holocaust flames with the hope that she may be able to save at least her son Jan. Though it is never known what really happened to Jan, his chances to survive Auschwitz are scarce to nothing. Sophie's ultimate choice remains a mystery to the end since she could not bring herself to recount it to another living soul. She hides the fact that she ever had a daughter. Even when she talks to Stingo about her daughter, initially, she hides the real circumstances of Eva's death. Her knowledge of Eva's death becomes a comfort only in comparison with her lack of knowledge about what really happened to Jan.

“Is it best to know about a child’s death, even one so horrible, or to know that the child lives but that you will never, never see him again? I don't know either for sure. Suppose I had chosen Jan to go...to go to the left instead of Eva. Would that have changed anything?” (518)

This very question summarises Sophie's guilt and grief. Stingo could easily identify the deep rooted guilt in her conscious even through her persistent lies. “...but the word “guilt”, I discovered that summer, was often dominant in her vocabulary, and it is now clear to me that a hideous sense of guilt always chiefly governed the reassessments she was force to make of her past. I also came to see that she tended to view her own recent history through a filter of self-loathing-apparently not a rare phenomenon among those who had undergone her particular ordeal”(155) The trauma of Auschwitz and the choice Sophie was forced to make helps us to understand her life after Auschwitz. Sophie's attraction for the schizophrenic Nathan, their unrestrained sexual relationships and her affinity towards death can be analyzed in this light. A mother who is forced to choose between her children cannot be religious. She queries, “Isn't that enough to make you not believe in this god. Who can believe in God who turns His back on people like that?” (208). Her hatred for religion manifests for the first time when she sees two nuns while she was chatting with Stingo. There, she explicitly states how he hates them and their religion. “Awful! Oh, how I hate that stupid religion”. She could perceive God only as a monster if he demands groveling from mankind. “ Yes, groveling in front of a God who must be a monster, Stingo, if He exist. A monster!” “I don't want to talk about religion. I hate religion”.

Sophie repeatedly claims that no one can understand Auschwitz and what Auschwitz can make people do. She says that people behave in the strangest ways and it is impossible to predict what they may do for themselves and for others. At one instance Sophie went on to say about the guilt feeling she bears all the time for surviving Auschwitz. “I know I will never get rid of it. Never. And because I never get rid of it, maybe that's the worst thing the Germans left me with.”(300) Sophie found it impossible to reveal her terrible past to Nathan. Though she told him once about her son Jan, she never told the entire truth. Eventually she brought herself to tell the truth to Stingo, but it was never easy for her. Sophie's continuous lies and partial truths point to her unsuccessful attempts to deny her past. Sophie's portrayal of her anti-Semite father as a supporter of Jews was an attempt from her part to deny the actual circumstances of her birth. Sophie was able to have a grip on her life for a while because of her relationship with Nathan. However, when Nathan's schizophrenia turned the villain and resulted in his desertion of Sophie, she fell into alcoholism. It can be argued to an extent that it was alcohol that loosened her tongue and made her spill out her past. Sophie's degradation was gradual but steady. It seems that everything conspired together to make it inevitable by means of her relationship with a Schizophrenic like Nathan. She was always aware of the strange temper of Nathan's nature. It could be

her affinity towards death that brought her and Nathan together. Her guilty consciousness would never have been pacified except by death.

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