

A.N.Harishraj, M.Phil-English,

Dr. C. Jothi

Department of English,

Assistant Professor of English

Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education,

Krishnankoil -626126

Tamil Nadu, India

The Elements of Survival and Guilt in the Novels of Heather Morris: *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Cilka's Journey*

Abstract

This paper titled “The Element of Survival and Guilt in the Novels of Heather Morris: *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Cilka's Journey*” talks about survival of the protagonists in the Holocaust camp. The paper also deals with the guilt experienced by the protagonist and their struggle to overcome their trauma. The thematic analysis is applied to the select novel of Heather Morris. The paper focuses on two major themes, Survival and Guilt. These two themes are prominent in the novel *TheTattooist of Auschwitz* and *Cilka's Journey*. The protagonist are Lale Sokolov and Cilka Klein, are both Jews and successful in surviving the holocaust. The characters Lale Sokolov and Cilka Klein are taken for this study. Both Lale and Cilka work with the Germans to ensure their survival. Survival by working with the German captors leads to guilty conscience in Lale and Cilka. Lale and Cilka are affected by the Survivors Guilt. Lale and Cilka seek redemption for their sins by helping others and putting their lives on the line to save others.

Keywords: *Holocaust, Survival, Guilt, Survivors' guilt, Sufferings of prison camps, Lale and Cilka*

Introduction

The novels *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Cilka's Journey* are written by the author Heather Morris. Heather Morris is a New Zealand born screenwriter and author. She was born in Te Awamutu, a small town located in the North Island, New Zealand. The novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* takes place during World War II in the German prison camp Auschwitz-Birkenau and the novel *Cilka's Journey* takes place during the same period in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Russian war prison Vorkuta. The Auschwitz and the Vorkuta are well-known war prisons. The living conditions in those prisons are bleak, and the prisoners have to endure an enormous amount of suffering to survive. Both the protagonists of these novels have survived the prison camps. The protagonist of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* has survived the German camp named Auschwitz-Birkenau, while Cilka Klein, the protagonist of the novel *Cilka's Journey*, has survived Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Russian Prison Vorkuta. To survive in this kind of prison camp is not a simple task, and any wrong move will result in certain death. The protagonists of the novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Cilka's Journey* are both Jews, and they both feel guilt for their survival.

The first novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* takes place in the year 1942, the protagonist of the novel is Lale Sokolov. The real name of Lale is Ludwig Eisenberg. His home town is Krompachy, Czechoslovakia and he lived in Bratislava. Since he is from Czechoslovakia, he is mostly referred to as a Slovakian Jew. Lale is transported from his home town Bratislava to Poland in a cattle train along with other men who are of Jewish background. Lale and others do not know that they are being transported to an Auschwitz camp instead of a working place. In the camp he receives the worst treatment possible to a human. The camp is controlled by German guards; they are abusive and cruel towards the

Jews. Lale understands that it is inevitable to go through the camp's suffering and he hopes to see freedom again. Lale Sokolov befriends many and works for the Germans to escape tortures that are unleashed on the Jewish prisoners. Lale becomes a Tätowierer in Auschwitz. In the camp Lale falls in love with another Jewish woman named Gita. Lale tries to keep her safe from harm's way and he mostly succeeds. Lale tries to help everyone in the prison by getting food from the local people. Lale gives the local people contraband items such as coins, gold, and jewellery in exchange of food. When the Russian Army advanced towards Poland and the Germans left the camp, gates open and let everyone free while rapidly firing on the prisoners. Lale escapes by going into the forests by crossing the freezing river. Most of the women are transported into rail carriages but Gita and three other girls that escape into the woods are saved by the Russians and sent to their natives. Lale returns to his home town in Krompachy and then he starts his journey in search of his love for his life, Gita. Lale and Gita coincidentally meet each other in Bratislava and recognise each other vividly. Lale and Gita get married and later they settle in Australia.

The second novel *Cilka's Journey* revolves around the character Cilka. The Cilka is based on a real person named Cecelia Klein. Cecelia was born on 17 March 1926 in the Eastern Slovakia. She was one of the three daughters of Fany Kleinova. Cilka is from an upper class family and is a Slovakian Jew. Cecelia Klien survived both the German concentration camp in Auschwitz and the famous Vorkuta Russian prison. When Cilka was at the age of sixteen, she was taken into the Auschwitz - Birkenau camp and after three years of suffering, she was again held prisoner by the Russians for another ten years in the cold Serbian prison. During her life in German camp, Cilka was abused, raped and was appointed as the leader of the death camp by the Senior Commandant of Birkenau, Lagerführer Schwarzhuber. Cilka was traumatised in the concentration camp. As a leader of the Block 25, Cilka was responsible for the deaths of her block. The block 25 is where the Germans keep

the sick and weak women. Germans kill the weak and sick women so Cilka's Block 25 is often called the Death block. The Vorkuta is referred to as a White Hell by the Russians. Since the Vorkuta camp is located in the north of Russia, it comes under the influence of the Arctic Circle. In Vorkuta, Cilka started to work in a coal mine and later became the camp nurse with the help of Doctor Yelena Georgiyevna. Cilka is compassionate towards her fellow inmates. She brings extra rations and she tries to repair herself from the wounds of German Camp. The place where Cilka is assigned to stay is called hut 46. The Russian prison is so much better than the German camp because in the German camp the guard will kill the prisoner for no reason and doing anything as simple as turning the face away from the officers while instructions can result in rifle fire. Cilka saves a lot of life in the Vorkuta and she loves a guy named Alexandr, a messenger in Vorkuta. After 1953, the Vorkuta started releasing the prisoners. Cilka and Alexandr both are released on the same day and they meet on a train to Moscow. Cilka and Alexandr lead a peaceful life in Košice.

Lale and Cilka are both able to survive by making the right choices at critical times. Lale Sokolov observes the ranking system of the camp and knowingly befriends a German guard. Lale knows that the guards can turn against him at any moment. By accepting the job as a tattooist in the camp, he begins to work directly under the German government. He reports only to Berlin and he is safe from the guard's ill treatment. German used numbers to identify the prisoners; they tattoo the number in the arms of prisoners. The one who tattoos the prisoners is called the Tätowierer. This new job of Lale comes with benefits such as a separate room from the other inmates. As a Tätowierer, Lale identifies himself with "Politische Abteilung" (*The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, 49) signifying that he works for the Political Department of Germany. The guards are no longer a threat yet any high ranking official can question Lale's actions. During the first week in the camp Lale happens to work under a kapo as a subservient prisoner. By being a subservient prisoner Lale cannot be

threatened by fellow inmates. Lale increases the number of acquaintances by knowing about everyone. His knowledge of languages aides in his survival, since it gives an advantage in social skills and gains popularity among prisoners. Even though Lale has taken the job of a Tätowierer, he feels sinned for his job. Since Lale is an orthodox Jew, tattooing is against his religious beliefs. Lale hesitantly tattoos other fellow Jews and he hatestattooing the women yet Lale tattoos every single one of the inmates. Lale prioritizes his survival over his beliefs. “I do what I can to survive.”(*The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, 34) The ability to adapt to the rapid change of environment is an absolute necessity to sustain life. From upper class citizen to an inmate in concentration can make an individual paranoid and be reluctant to obey orders but Lale quickly accepts his fate and acts according to the given orders to please the Germans. Even after escaping the Auschwitz- Birkenau camp, Lale worksfor the Russians as a pimp. Lale finally escapes from the Russians by simply leaving in a bicycle since the Russians do not care about him.

Cilka Klein, the protagonist of the novel *Cilka's Journey* suffers to the extreme both physically and mentally. Cilka survives in the Auschwitz – Birkenau camp for two years and the Russian Vorkuta war prison for another fifteen years. As a female prisoner in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, Cilka and fellow female prisoners constantly experience sexual harassment and physical abuse from the German guards. The prison Commander Schwarzhuber, makes Cilka as his slave and he abuses her periodically. To survive in the camp, Cilka does everything without any resistance. Cilka “gives in to the inevitable.”(*Cilka's Journey*, 12). The Commander Schwarzhuber makes her the leader in charge of Women Block-25. Cilka is now personally responsible for the lives in the block. She decides who should live and who should not. This is traumatic to Cilka since she is just 17 and every other woman is from her Jewish community. Cilka sends her own mother to the death row; she has no other way but to oblige higher orders. Cilka survives the Auschwitz

camp by being a puppet. The German camp was eventually captured by the Russians during the war. Cilka was charged guilty for working with the German officials and sleeping with the camp commandant. Cilka explains her role in prison: “like many others here, I was forced to do whatever I was told by those who imprisoned me.” (*Cilka’s Journey*, 5) but the Russians sentence her to fifteen years in labour camp. Cilka and others in the Russian gulag endured harsh Serbian weather. In the Russian camp, the guards will not threaten their life instead the male prisoners will abuse the female inmates. Cilka has further been abused by Boris, a male inmate who is the leader of the prison gang. Being abused all her life, Cilka uses this opportunity to save herself from other male prisoners and Russian guards. Since no one will dare to touch her anymore. She accepts one suffering over the other to ensure her survival. When a fellow inmate Hannah accuses her of being lived off well in the German camp, Cilka justifies herself by saying that all she does, is to survive and nothing more.

“I have been given the choice of participating in the destruction of our people, and I have chosen to do so in order to survive. I can only hope I am not one day judged as Perpetrator or a collaborator.” (*The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, 158)

Lale Sokolov and Cilka Klein have survived and they are better off than their fellow inmates in the camp. Lale becomes the Tätowierer and Cilka became the Block leader during their stay in the camp. Even though they escape from being an ordinary prisoner, they begin to feel guilty for what they have done to be in such a position. Most holocaust survivors suffer this syndrome called as the “Survivor’s guilt”. Survivor’s guilt is a mental condition that occurs when a person believes they have done something wrong by surviving. These people believe that it is unfair that they have survived when others have died. Lale and Cilka are severely affected by this guilt. This can be noted in their actions as Lale begins to put his life on the line to get some food from the locals by exchanging valuables. Lale after becoming the

tattooist helps everyone around him by smuggling food and medicines. Lale often smuggles his entire food ration to fellow inmates, he stays hungry while feeding others his food. Lale experiences nightmares and anxiety due to his guilt. Cilka experiences the same guilt as Lale Sokolov. She develops hatred towards her own self and engages in reckless action that may result in self destruction. "Help me wash it off, make it go away'.....'I can't get them clean(Cilka's Journey, 365)".

The author compares Cilka's guilt with that of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Being a leader in the death block, she feels that her hand is filled with blood and she cannot clean the blood. During her time as a nurse in the Russian prison, Cilka does not care about her life and rushes towards collapsing mine to save lives. The individuals who have the survivor's guilt believe that they do not save enough lives of others. This characteristic trait can be found in both Lale Sokolov and Cilka Klein.

The protagonists of the novels *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Cilka's Journey* have survived by making hard choices. They do some unimaginable tasks to stay alive and break their moral codes to live another day as a free person. Their intention to be a free person does cost them a heavy price: guilt. Lale and Cilka are burdened with guilt for their entire lives. The author Heather Morris has clearly laced the intricate human emotions in both human characters. It can be noted that Lale and Cilka are forced to work as a tattooist and block leader yet they do the work for their sustenance. One main reason for their survival and endurance is hope, both hoped for a better life beyond their prison camp. Lale's hope is Gita and Cilka's hope restores when she sees Alexandr. The elements of survival and guilt that are present in the novel are highlighted in this paper. The novel can be analyzed by using psychoanalytic theories such as trauma theory for further insight to the character's mind.

Works cited

Morris, Heather. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*: Zaffre, 2018.

Morris, Heather. *Cilka's Journey*. Zaffre, 2019.

“The Holocaust.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Mar. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust.

“Survivor Guilt.” *GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog*, 19 Jan. 2018, www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/survivor-guilt.