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Analysis of symbols in ‘*The tattooist of Auschwitz*’: A novel by Heather Morris

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyse the important symbols used in ‘The tattooist of Auschwitz’ a novel by Heather Morris. This novel is based on the powerful true survival story of Lale Sokolov, a Jew prisoner of Auschwitz. So, this article also discusses the background and importance of Holocaust fictions as well as the meaning of symbols and their significance in any literary work. Symbols add deeper meaning to the literary work. They have complex meanings and represent greater ideas. Author has used various symbols in the novel which are unconventional and new to the category of Holocaust fiction. Analysis of all important symbols will get done one by one and this article will try to study the hidden meaning of these symbols and to connect them to the broader canvas.

Keywords: The tattooist of Auschwitz, Heather Morris, Holocaust Literature, Symbols

Introduction:

Heather Morris is a well-known New Zealand born Australian writer, famous for her series of Holocaust novels. Her debut historical fiction novel ‘The tattooist of Auschwitz’ published in 2018; best fits in the category of the Holocaust novels. The novel is based on the powerful story of Lale Sokolov, a Slovakian Jew man sent to the Auschwitz Concentration camp during World War II. He was assigned a job of tattooing the prisoners with numbers into their arms. The novel tells the story of his survival and love with a girl Gita Furman, to whom he met and tattooed in the camp. The author is neither Jew nor having any connection with Holocaust. She just tells the story of the love and survival of Lale and Gita from the perspective of the protagonist Lale Sokolov.

Holocaust is the genocide of European Jews by Nazi Germany. It is a stigma on the world history and humanity. It demands to be remembered. So, it is very important to write and preserve the Holocaust literature because it will always keep the memory of Holocaust and its inhumane destruction alive in our minds. That’s why Spivey, Tyler Grey argues in

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his thesis – ‘However, the holocaust demands to be remembered and therefore it is necessary to write about it, even if the work is fictional.’ The Holocaust literature deals with the destruction of European Jew community by Nazi Germany during the World War II, mostly in the years between 1942 -1945. According to Levin, Gerald ‘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’. (Holocaust Literature as a genre: A description and a bibliography)

Famous Holocaust fiction writer Elie Wiesel had stated - ‘A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz.’ So, everything that is written about the Jew community’s survivals, traumas and sufferings during Holocaust at the concentration camps comes under the category of Holocaust literature. So, the novel ‘The tattooist of Auschwitz’ comes under the category of Holocaust literature as it narrates the story of Love and Survival of a Jew prisoner of Auschwitz. Author Heather Morris has succeeded in her task of keeping the Holocaust story of Lale Sokolov alive in front of the readers using simple and short sentences, powerful narration technique and different symbols. These all characteristics make this novel one of the best-selling books of the twenty- first century.

The main aim of this research article is the study and analysis of symbols used in the novel-‘The tattooist of Auschwitz’. Before starting the analysis of these symbols, let’s check the definition and significance of symbols in the literature. According to the Dictionary of Literary terms and literary theory by Cuddon, J.A.-‘Symbols are an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else.’ (page no.699) In simpler words, Symbols are objects, characters and figures used to represent ideas or content. Symbols always stand for the bigger ideas and deeper meanings in the literature and contain several layers of meaning. Symbols are used as objects or actions those mean something more than their literal meaning. The use of symbols in the literature can give a deep and detailed impression on readers. That’s why St. Augustine explained the importance of symbols in his works as-‘Symbols are powerful because they are visible signs of invisible realities.’ There are many symbols used in the novel by Heather Morris which give a deep meaning and significance to the story of love and survival of Lale Sokolov in Auschwitz concentration Camp.

Analysis of the symbols in the novel:

Heather Morris has used many symbols in the novel which give the layers of meaning and paints the colourful scenes in it. Let’s encode and analyse them one by one.

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I.The Tattoo: The tattooist is the protagonist and hero of the novel. He is forced to do the hard work at Auschwitz II-Birkenau Concentration camp. He chose the work of tattooing the prisoners, which was comparatively easier than other physical hard work at the camp. The main character of the novel is Lale who is working as the tattooist, so the symbol of Tattoo often comes in the story and plays a pivotal role. Though the tattoo is a form of body modification for the sake of beauty, art or identity but the Nazis were tattooing every prisoner with identification numbers which are not for the art or beauty but for humiliation. The tattoos of the numbers in the novel symbolises the new identity of the prisoners. It also symbolises that, the prisoners were not considered as human beings after coming to Auschwitz. They were just numbers with no past (Ch.5, page 68) no future and even with no names. They were just a counter race, not really human at all. Tattoo is also a symbol of the new life of prisoner, forcefully marked on them with permanent ink of inhumane treatment by Nazi Germany which would haunt them through out their lives.

II.The supply bag: The supply bag of the tattooist is one of the unconventional symbols in this Holocaust novel. Actually, Lale was forced to work at the camp. Fortunately, he got the easier job of tattooing the fellow prisoners. So, one can

think that, the bag of tattooist could be the negative symbol slavery and pain but actually we can see it as the symbol of protection and safety throughout the novel. Lale's supply bag indicates him as the worker for the political wing of SS and the added protection the job of tattooist affords him. It also gives him a kind of permit of going everywhere in the camp. No Nazi or SS guard would bother him going anywhere in the camp with his bag. So, he helped many fellow prisoners and also managed his survival using this privilege. The supply bag becomes a hidden source of help, hope and limited freedom for Lale.

III.The character of Tattooist: The character of tattooist in Auschwitz is also symbolic. The tattooist Lale Sokolov, protagonist of the novel represents Mordecai, the famous Biblical character of Old Testament. According to the book of Esther, Mordecai saved the life of Jew community exiled in Persia. He used the privilege and intelligence to save the lives of Jews from the destructive plan of Haman the Agagite, wicked courtier of Persia. Lale's motto 'To save one is to save the world' (Ch.2, page 35) also resembles his humanity and sublime nature, like Mordecai. The job of tattooist gave Lale extra privilege and relaxation. He was unintentionally giving pain to the prisoners while tattooing because it was his assigned work but still he managed to provide them extra food from

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his ration and used his position to help them and also to save the lives of many prisoners.

IV. The currency: Money or currency is the symbol of trade for survival in the novel. Usually the currency gets no value in the place like Auschwitz where the prisoners were subject to starvation and malnutrition and the life was uncertain. Nazis used to take away the jewellery, money and even the clothes and shoes of prisoners after their admission in the concentration camp. Getting enough food and surviving in the hell of Auschwitz camp was the main concern of any prisoner in the camp. There was a sure death sentence to the prisoners who get caught with money or expensive things. So, it was not possible to use and carry any currency in the camp by any prisoner. But still the currency plays a pivotal part in the novel. Here, currency is the symbol of the only aid of successful survival in the Auschwitz where no basic needs of food and medication for prisoners provided by Nazis. Lale used gold, gems and jewels and sometimes food too as currency in the concentration camp. Lale's only link with the world outside the Auschwitz camp was Victor and Yuri, the paid polish workers who were living near the camp. He used to give them Gems, jewels and gold for smuggling extra food, chocolate and medicines, etc. for him because there was no any currency available in the camp for prisoners. Currency symbolises here not

only a mere exchange of money but the exchange of precious jewels for saving the more precious, priceless human lives.

V. The chocolate: The Chocolate symbolises love and commitment of Lale for his beloved Gita. He used to smuggle chocolates in the camp with the help of Victor and Yuri. Chocolate was also used as the bribe offered by Lale to the lady Kapo of Gita's block. So, it also serves as the currency for prisoners starving in the camp and gives another layer of meaning to the symbol of Chocolate in this novel.

VI. The American Plane: The American plane is a symbol of hope in the novel. One day, suddenly the American plane flied over the camp. Prisoners saw the plane and started directing it towards the camp. They became happy and got the hope for life and freedom. It symbolised them the attention of world towards their misery. It filled their heart with hope and thought of freedom. They started celebrating the attention of the world who was opposing Nazi Germany. They thought that Americans would help them soon to get free from this hell, humiliation, slavery and pain. Prisoners suddenly started running and directing the plane toward the crematorium. Unfortunately the plane filed away and Nazis started open fire on the prisoners. But the incident not gone in vain. Soon the world had its attention toward the concentration camp and inhumane

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programs of Hitler and Nazi Germany and also it gave a ray of hope to the protagonist and fellow prisoners. So, the American plane becomes the symbol of hope for the prisoners in the novel.

VII. The Castration of Leon: Testicles are symbols of masculinity and reproduction and the castration of Leon, the fellow prisoner and assistant of Lale symbolises the emasculation of the European Jewry by Nazis. This also symbolises the inhuman behaviour and atrocities of Nazi Germany on the Jew community. Leon was a sensitive young man. Dr Mengele castrated him. He returned demoralised and hopeless and frightened. This symbolises the mental emasculation of the Jew community as well as the castration of power and masculine virtues like protest and agitation of a community by Nazi Germany.

VIII. The character of Cilka: Cilka is a fellow prisoner. She was very beautiful young girl with a special privilege of keeping long hair. Her head was not shaved like the other female prisoners because she was forced to become the mistress of Schwarzhuber, the top commandant of Auschwitz II- Birkenau concentration camp. Maintaining such a long relationship with a Jew lady prisoner by a high ranked SS officer seems difficult to many critics. But our aim is not to find the truth and historicity of this character but the symbolic

meaning of it. Cilka too resembles a biblical character like the character of 'Tattooist' in the novel. Cilka symbolises the extraordinary beauty which saved the lives of her people like Biblical Queen Esther. We get the story of extraordinary beautiful Jew girl Esther who became the queen of Persia in the book of Esther of the Old Testament of Holy Bible. She saved the lives of her people exiled in Persia using her charm and position as a queen of King Ahasuerus. Cilka serves the same role for Lale in the novel. She saved his life by requesting Schwarzhuber for reposting him to his previous job of tattooist. So, she symbolises the character of Biblical Queen Esther in the novel.

Conclusion:

It can be concluded that this novel – 'The tattooist of Auschwitz' has many symbols in it. These symbols are not only decorating the novel with different colours but also giving it a deep meaning. These symbols have complex meanings and they indicate bigger ideas. Symbols also have given a new dimension to the story. The protagonist and some other characters too have symbolic meanings and it is seen that, we can connect them to the famous Biblical Jew characters too. The character of Lale and Cilka resemble the qualities of Biblical characters of Mordecai and Esther. We can see some traditional or common symbols in typical holocaust fictions, like: Wagon, Fences and Gas chambers etc. But Heather

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Morris has used many unconventional and new symbols in this novel which give uniqueness to this novel among the other Holocaust fictions. So, from the symbol analysis above, it can be concluded that the novel has various symbols in it and author has used them to add deeper meaning in the story. These symbols support the central theme of 'Survival and Love' of this novel and connect the modern readers with the real spirit and pulse of Holocaust survivals. These symbols help reader to understand the unconquerable desire for life of the protagonist and his fellow prisoners and the extraordinary love story of ordinary Jew prisoners of Auschwitz.

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