

Naipaul moves between the stance of insider and that of outsider with regard to the societies he portrays, and blends, in an unsettling manner, sympathy with irony, cruelty with compassion, in the treatment of certain characters. These ambivalences are interpreted as the product of his situation of cultural dislocation.

He has always considered it important for a writer to establish a distinct identity, especially when he or she is an outsider or wants to be considered one. This leaves a mark on his writings. To quote from his Acceptance Speech at the first David Cohen Literature Prize awarding ceremony:

I have always felt the need... to establish the identity of the writer, the narrator, the gatherer of impressions: to make the point that, whatever associations came with the language, this English-language traveler in the world was not English but colonial, and carried different pictures in his head.

Naipaul's feeling of alienation stems however from a spiritual crisis- basically the result of the twin problems of an aversion to the Trinidadian society in which he was born and an infructuous diaspora to London where he sought to launch his publishing career but felt isolated and alienated. Ever after living in London for three decades he feels himself distanced from the cultural spatial milieu of London. "London is my metropolitan centre; it is my commercial centre; and yet I know that it is a kind of limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral. One's concerns are not the concerns of local people." (V. S. Naipaul interviewed by Ian Hamilton, Joshi 10). His isolated life in his Wiltshire cottage bred in him a kind of alienation which is a characteristic of self-imposed exile.

His discussions of and writing about his life tend to dwell on his feelings of non-alignment and alienation. Writing with increasing irony and pessimism, he has often bleakly detailed the dual problems of the Third World: the oppressions of colonialism and the chaos of post-colonialism. He portrays his life as distinguished by "homelessness and drift and longing". He describes himself as having been born into obscurity and poverty. His childhood, he states, was characterized by disorder. As a child, he says, he felt that he "was in the wrong place", and that he was "a kind of helpless unit in this large family organization".

Conclusion:

The exploration suggests that Naipaul's marginalized existence affects his expatriate sensibility directly and his acute sense of alienation and homelessness reflects in his encounters with the world and effect his writings. The rhetoric of his displacement can be found in all his compositions. Naipaul considered England as his steady home and he came to term with his exile status forever. Although, Naipaul later considered England as his steady home and he came to term with his exile status gradually, yet he can never be completely free from the deep impressionistic experiences of his marginalized self as a citizen of nowhere.

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TRAUMA ON THE BIG SCREEN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA IN HOLOCAUST FILMS *SOPHIE'S CHOICE* (1982) AND *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS* (2009)

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Abstract

*Trauma has always been plagued by a lack of adequate representation whether it is literature or the visual screen. Hollywood has often been accused of sensationalism and trivialisation when it comes to the depiction of trauma and the phrase 'trauma industrial complex' has been associated with the film industry. The representation of the Holocaust in popular culture also engenders a social consciousness towards it and films play an integral role in shaping this consciousness. This paper will analyse how trauma is represented in *Sophie's Choice* and *Inglourious Basterds* and what liberties do these films take in the representation. The paper will also look at the concepts of trauma industrial complex and the femme fatale to understand the vision of these films and place them in the realm of trauma studies.*

Keywords: Trauma, Films, Hollywood, Holocaust, Trauma Industrial Complex, Femme Fatale.

The Holocaust was a cataclysm which engendered mass genocide of upto six million Jews during the years 1933-1946. It was brought into effect by Hitler's 'final solution,'¹ a divisive policy which focused on the extermination of Jews and anyone else who didn't align with state policy. Its horrors live on in public memory and have shaped a global consciousness with monuments erected for survivors even today. However, the survivor memories can often be desecrated in the name of artistic expression by the popular culture industry, thus begetting the term 'trauma industrial complex.' When trauma and related events are used to inform practices, thus spawning a whole culture around it, meaning is at risk of getting diluted.. As Emily Alford writes:

¹ The "Final solution" was the term given to Hitler's policy of the complete annihilation of Jews, which as several historians agree was put in place after Operation Barbarossa in 1941.

“...Sad stories are the raw materials that can hopefully be molded into a sellable product.” Given this context, how do we place Hollywood films depicting the Holocaust in relation to trauma? Can we see them as a part of the larger set of trauma-related films or study them as a separate medium? Do they perpetuate structured oppression by partaking in the same stereotypes of survivors stories or are they a form of resilience and reconciliation?

Meryl Streep’s iconic role as Sophie in *Sophie’s Choice* is oft-remembered for the vulnerable portrayal of a mother, living with the “phantom pain”² and ghosts of her children’s memories. She was forced to sacrifice her daughter, in order to save her son from the fate of a concentration camp, thus outlining the toughest choice available to a mother. Her choice is presented to her like a gift, as the SS Officer tells her point blank-

You are a Polack, not a Yid...that gives you a privilege, a choice.

Not only does this film explore the relationship between the Holocaust and trauma, but it also provides a comment on the creative process. Stingo, as portrayed by Peter MacNicol, is a writer whose thwarted attempts to write a novel form the crux of the story. However, it is Sophie’s story, which finds true representation in the film as a tragic memory, marked by Stingo’s insolvable attempts to write a story. Perhaps it is a comment on the embellishment of stories in literature, pointing to the fact that real trauma can neither be effaced nor actually put into words.

Sophie is given to lying about her trauma; she carries it around like an albatross around her neck.

Her story is like the confessional testimony of a survivor. As Lisa Carstens writes:

(Sophie’s) voice is credited with the agency that betrays her, the agency that brands her with guilt. If Sophie is her own betrayer, to that extent is she held paradoxically responsible for her own victimisation? (293)

This criticism of the tragic heroine stems from the debates around William Styron’s novel on which the film is based. Sophie’s status as a Holocaust victim is doubted, in contrast with the Jewish victims (Sophie is shown as Polish), who had no ‘choice’ or no ‘agency.’ In the film however, the focus is on her trauma as an entity which haunts her day and night, leading her to get into abusive relationships and further dehumanise herself. Her relationship with Stingo is no less controlling than her relationship with her abusive boyfriend Nathan (as played by Kevin Kline). Paul B. Weinstein writes how films provide an “empathetic” reconstruction of

² Phantom pain’ is a term taken from Helene Epstein’s idea of the phantom pain as a pain which is ever-present. Epstein however uses it for the pain felt by second-generation survivors of the Holocaust.

events and serve as a “carrier of historical messages in our culture.” (27) The harrowing flashback scene of the choice in the film is not only unsettling, but it also draws us in empathy towards the tragic heroine, thus working to draw the audiences closer.

In a historical film, reconnection with the past is a measure of its artistic appeal and *Sophie's Choice* appeals to the audiences by virtue of its connectivity. The interaction between viewer and the film also shapes the responses to the trauma depicted in it, making it an important watershed film of

Holocaust consciousness. The film is not a microcosm of the concentrationary³ universe but also placed in the ‘free’ world of America, as it is set in Brooklyn. However, Sophie seems to have no choice in either universe, as she is equally haunted by her trauma. The film’s subject is trauma and no ordinary mode of inquiry can do justice to it hence there is use of techniques like flashbacks. It illuminates a subject as brutal as genocide but also imbues the notion of a burden or a secret to survivor stories, as survivors are often marked by guilt. It narrates the story of a survivor after Auschwitz; after the viciousness is over but the identification with the guilt and trauma remains. While the book was touted to be anti-Semitic, it is Meryl Streep’s performance in the film that is incomparable and makes the viewer identify with the heroine’s trauma. By making Sophie into a disruptive force almost, Streep takes away the stereotyping associated with the tragic heroine in film and literature. It is the contrariness in the portrayal of the character that resonates with the viewers and makes the film into a virtual experience of trauma.

On the other hand, *Inglourious Basterds* delves into the historical past but laces it with fantasy to present a concoction of revenge. This revenge fantasy, directed by Quentin Tarantino has been criticised for the use of graphic violence and misogyny. The charge of sensationalism was often directed at violent Holocaust fiction, like the ones written by Kazetnik, known for his *House of Dolls*. (1955) However, the movie is not lurid; it grants an agency to the female protagonist even while presenting her as a femme fatale. Shosanna Dreyfus (as played by Melanie Laurent) plans on avenging the death of her family at the hands of the Nazis and burns them all in a theatre in the film. The other major female character, Bridget Von Hammersmark (as portrayed by Diane Kruger) is a conduit for the plans of the special army led by Lt. Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt). However, she is relegated to a merely ornamental role and meets a rather violent end, thus bringing to fore the charges of misogyny against Tarantino, who is often known for killing women off in grisly ways in his films. Tarantino imposes his own vision upon the traumatic past of the Holocaust and provides the outlet of fantasy and revenge for alleviation of trauma.

³of or related to the concentration camps.

The scalping of SS men and the carving of the abhorred Swastika symbol on their heads might be seen as cathartic by some but critics question why violence has been used to depict an event which was by large, known for its terrible violence. Is this merely for sensationalism to mould a traumatic past according to a creative vision? Or can we justify the use of violence as merely a depiction of the graphic nature of the Holocaust? Perhaps, we can include this film in the conversation on Holocaust studies just to understand the nature of trauma and violence depicted. Women in both *Sophie's Choice* and *Inglourious Basterds* are subjected to abuse and rape; Shosanna has to spurn the advances of Fredrick Zoller (Daniel Bruhl) while Sophie is repeatedly abused by Nathan. Shosanna depicts the femme fatale; a single woman who brings down an entire Nazi empire through her actions. The 'femme fatale' has been sexualised in Hollywood, as numerous Bond movies have archetypes of woman villains and this points to a "crisis of male identity." (Hales 224) However this trope is inverted in this movie as agency and power are granted to the femme fatale. Her past trauma is also delineated in the beginning of the movie, in the scene where Colonel Hans Land of the SS (as played by Christoph Waltz) tries to shoot her down, after gunning down her whole family brutally. In an indictment of the Nazi regime, Shosanna collaborates with her African-American lover to burn down the theatre, thus making a comment on the policies of racial difference followed by the Nazis. Two minorities bring down the Nazis and thus there is a collation of gender and race politics in the film.

Tom Seymour writes that tinseltown Hollywood's depiction of the Holocaust often falls short of expectations, as they forego the concentration camps altogether. He says:

(they) flinch away from the appalling realities of the Holocaust, often circumnavigating the death camps entirely.

That is true of *Inglourious Basterds*, where the concentration camp universe is not depicted altogether while it is briefly a part of Alan Pakula's *Sophie's Choice*. Since trauma and violence were the most prominent in this universe, the foregoing of its depiction makes us question whether Hollywood is violating the sacredness of the past. The trauma of the Holocaust is seen as an impregnable past and we should probe whether the use of black comedy as a genre by Tarantino is apt for its depiction. The question arises who are we laughing at in the film. Are we laughing at the Nazis and the scenes of scalping? Is the audience an active participant in this comedy-fantasy? Does the comeuppance for Nazis generate laughs or an unsettling feeling? After all, it is Shosanna's unsettling laugh that we are left with, at the end, when her lover Marcel (Jacky Ido) burns down the nitrate film, as her image on screen laughs, possibly sensing Nazi fear of death. Perhaps it is Tarantino's attempt to provide catharsis, as we discussed earlier. In the branding together of a Special Force army, he is giving a means of resistance and subversion to the Jews, as the question was often raised during the Holocaust why there was no one who cried out or protested.

There is an attempt to lessen German guilt through the character of the German film actress Bridget Von Hammersmark, who helps out the Special Force army in their underground attempts at resilience. German complicity during the genocide of Jews has been debated a lot and Hammersmark (Kruger) stands for those men and women who provided sanctuary and shelter to countless Jews.

Another question that arises in the depiction of trauma by both these films is the verisimilitude. How can we trust the survivor story presented to us by Alan Paluka and as for Tarantino, we are already aware that it is inspired fiction at best. Sophie's memory only acts as testimony in the film *Sophie's Choice* but can this serve as a verified picture of how the trauma was experienced? Is Tarantino's depiction of the collusion with Nazi political forces based upon real-life instances and how can we vouch for its truth? Films piece together real-life trauma from reportage, oral and written testimonies but in the process, meaning can often be lost. Jewish author Imre Kertesz has criticised Steven Spielberg's iconic *Schindler's List* by saying that:

It is obvious the American Spielberg, who incidentally wasn't even born until after the War, has and can have no idea of the authentic reality of a Nazi concentration camp. I regard as kitsch any (such) representation of the Holocaust (Qtd in Seymour, n.p).

So the most pertinent question that arises from this study is that what 'choice' is available to survivors and how can we brand the ones who resist as 'bastards?' Perhaps Tarantino's attempt to give a choice to the victims in the means of Aldo Raine led Special Army is an act of giving agency. Unlike Sophie, Shosanna forcefully takes what is hers; she implements her own choice while Sophie's choice is circumscribed by her dire circumstances. So there is a full circle as we see from the 1982 film to the modern day revenge drama. However, it is telling that the act of 'choice' and using it to negotiate with trauma can only happen in the imagination, as *Inglourious Basterds* is merely a fantasy. Victims of the Holocaust and survivors even today walk around with no choice; with their trauma manifesting as PTSD or other diseases and "phantom pain" which cripples them. Hollywood's attempts to reveal the darkest nature of the Holocaust often fail but can still be seen as important conversation regarding the representation of the "conceptual black hole" that is trauma (qtd in Hales, 224).

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