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MEMORY, HARRY POTTER AND THE HOLOCAUST

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ABSTRACT

“Memory is a tricky thing: it picks and chooses what to preserve and what to discard”, says Tamsin Ayres in her book *These Hills called Home*. Harry Potter and his world may be compartmentalised, labelled and dismissed as fantasy literature, in other words that which is unreal and not rooted in social reality, but Ayres’s words evoke many elements from the series- the Mirror of Erised, Riddle’s diary, the Pensieve, Harry’s Stag Patronus, the Golden Snitch and its “Flesh-Memory”- magical objects that are created by J.K Rowling to explore the multifaceted nature of Memory. There are many more instances where the characters play around with how to deal with memory (Professor Slughorn altering his memory about Tom Riddle), or how memory opens up a whole new dimension to someone’s character (Snape’s memory which reveals the truth about Dumbledore’s death). These are not just random incidents from the series- instead, these separate, individual events, when put together become threads that can be woven into a tapestry- that shows different shades of memory- as desire, torment, threat, betrayal, trauma, healing and so on. But in general, Rowling seems to warn the reader against something- the power of images, how easy it is to be fooled by them, and how careful one must be in interpreting them. This paper explores the universality of Rowling’s ideas regarding memory, how relevant it is in relation to Nazi Germany under Hitler’s regime, and how Holocaust imagery can be found in between the images presented.

Key Words: Memory, Holocaust, Mirror of Erised, Riddle’s diary, Pensieve, Stag Patronus, Golden- Snitch.

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The concept of Memory has always been an intriguing question for human beings. From the mnemonic devices associated with the oral tradition, invention of written language, and recording of events in the forms of diaries and journals, to the invention of external memory devices in the modern age in the forms of computer memory, pen-drives, hard-disks and so on, we are constantly in a race to stretch our limits to preserve what we can of the present, and of the past. In literature, memory often becomes a major theme assuming three forms- individual or personal memory, collective memory and historical memory; and all these dimensions come into play in J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. This paper tries to connect two parallel-

seeming worlds- Rowling's wizarding world as seen in the books of the series and the Europe during 1933-45, particularly Hitler's Nazi regime and the Holocaust, using Memory as the bridge.

The First World War had affected Germany as a nation, both economically and politically. In this context, fascism, taken forward by the National Socialist Party (Nazis) became the popular ideology. The Fascists believed that only a social, economic as well as cultural regeneration would help them recover from the crisis they were facing. The Nazis took over the Reichstag in 1932, and Hitler became the Chancellor shortly afterwards. The Nazis under Hitler promoted a sense of nationalism- that sacrificed democratic ideals for the "greater good" of the nation. They also identified the Jews as the primary obstacle to the formation of a unified, powerful Aryan nation. This concept of the restoration of the German state was based on racial and ethnic purity. From the beginning, Hitler and his followers had put forth an anti-Semitic rhetoric- the Jews, as majority of them were merchants who, unlike the German did not create anything new or brought about innovations (in the Nazi ideology), were identified as the reason why Germany was suffering from economic issues. The Jew was described as a destructive spirit, who lends money to innocent Germans, makes them pay unreasonable debts and renders them bankrupt. The propaganda initially advocated tolerance of the Jews. Soon enough it developed into their segregation from the society, to confining them into ghettos, to total racial cleansing. This series of events- starting with the marginalisation and culminating at the state-sanctioned violence is referred to as The Holocaust. The *Encyclopaedia of Global Studies* defines the Holocaust as:

...the systematic annihilation of Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II. It has since evolved into a global icon representing the perils of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of state-sponsored atrocities. Approximately six million Jews perished in the Nazi annihilation in Germany. Millions of others—including Gypsies and homosexuals—were also killed. But the primary objective of the extermination camps, where inmates were killed in gas chambers and by other means of mass execution, was what the Nazis referred to as the "final solution to the Jewish question". (Levy)

The Holocaust and its memories have been explored through various literary forms by a number of authors- the survivors themselves who tried to give voice to their suffering through their writings, their descendants who found it difficult to live with the anger they felt, those shaken by the crimes against humanity through research, those with Jewish- American, or Jewish-Israeli heritage- the list goes on. It has also found a place in children's literature, as in the *Harry Potter* series.

A peripheral reading of the fan-pages and chat-rooms dedicated to discussions on the series is enough to reveal that Harry Potter fans have identified connections between Germany leading up to the Second World War and the wizarding world moving towards a second wizarding war. Similarities has been established in the characterisations of Lord Voldemort and Hitler, Gellert Grindelwald and Hitler, Albus Dumbledore and Winston Churchill, Cornelius Fudge (Minister for Magic) and Neville Chamberlain (British Prime Minister), the Death Eaters and the Nazis etc. Jonathan V. Last argues that "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" is written as a "historical allegory":

Harry is the only witness to Voldemort's reappearance; but he tells Albus Dumbledore, the school's headmaster, who tries to raise the alarm. Dumbledore is an old and respected figure, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. But when he attempts to set England's wizards against the coming storm, the government -- under the administration of Cornelius Fudge, the minister of magic -- denies that Voldemort is alive and launches a campaign to discredit Dumbledore. Let's start with Voldemort, who makes for a fair Hitler: He is an aspiring dictator who wants to cleanse the world of "mud-bloods" -- wizards who have normal, or "muggle," parentage. Dumbledore is clearly Ms. Rowling's Churchill. Like the British lion, Dumbledore is a part of the establishment, but when he tries to awaken people to the threat that Voldemort poses, he becomes unpopular. Ms. Rowling's wizards, like the British of the 1930s, are exhausted from their last war and unwilling to believe that it's time to take up arms again.

Like Neville Chamberlain, Minister Fudge is eager to help his constituents look the other way. Throughout the '30s, Chamberlain, fearing that Churchill was out for his job, conducted a campaign

against his fellow Tory. Chamberlain denied the existence of the German menace and ridiculed Churchill as a "warmonger." (Last)

But, a closer analysis would reveal a number of other underlying similarities; such as the Ministry's decision to create the "Muggle-born Register" under Voldemort which identifies Muggle-borns as usurpers of magical power obtained illegally, which is similar to the Nazi's decision to deny civil rights to Jews. Similarly, Dolores Umbridge's reformations in Hogwarts resonates the party's interference in everything from labour unions, education, social organisations as well as religion.

But merely identifying similarities does not serve any purpose- one could argue that most readers are aware of the existence of these connections. However, the true relevance of *Harry Potter* and its Holocaust undertones lie in the very argument itself- most readers (across the globe) are aware of these connections. And that points one towards the idea of the collective memory. The Holocaust was a geographically situated, time-specific event focused on a particular racial group. Yet the memories of the trauma associated with it are inherent or rather passed on not just to the descendants of the survivors, but to the readers around the world:

The geographical, temporal and terrifying dimensions of the events of the Holocaust have filtered into a social and cultural consciousness where the individual experiences of the survivors extend past the coherent historical period and contribute to a post-traumatic manifestation even today. The traumatic events of the Shoah reach beyond the experiences of its survivors and acquire a historical and collective aspect...(Patterson 202)

The same idea was explored by Maurice Halbwachs in his *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* in 1925. Halbwachs was one of the first to argue that individual memory develops as the product of social change, and that memory was itself a process, an ever changing representation of the past. The codes required to identify the metaphors in *Harry Potter* are embedded in the consciousness of all educated readers- it has become part of the psyche of the collective- similar to the idea of the "collective unconscious" Carl Jung discusses. The trauma of the Holocaust was not made known to the world through official records, or party-censored media reports of the time. They came out through literature written by those who had personal memories of the event- such as *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, or *Night* by Elie Wiesel- and they eventually become part of the curriculum in schools and colleges as well (even if the books are not prescribed, the trauma of the Jewish community is not at least left out in factual description of the Holocaust), accounting to the role "memory" plays in the process of historiography.

Inserting images from a historical event to symbolize the nature of evil in a work of fiction, with teenagers as the focused reading group, has various political implications. The books in the series in a way guide the young readers towards ways of dealing with the memories of the trauma; it does not impose any conclusions or prejudices on them- the reader becomes his/her own judge. But Rowling offers a framework where memory in all its dimensions, is explored and exposed- to aid the reader in making a conscious choice.

"In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud offered a direct relation between his theory of trauma (developed through his studies of hysteria) and historical violence" (Patterson 203). According to his psychoanalytical theories, a patient who has suffered a traumatic experience may be treated professionally through three main phases of recovery: recollection, repetition and working through. This process eventually helps the patient survive, regardless of the tormented past, as the process eventually helps establish a system of support and healthy relationships with loved ones that help overcome the trauma and reduce it to a manageable dimension (though not denying its occurrence). When extended to "historical trauma", where the symptoms or effects of the trauma are experienced collectively and across the generations, a personal working through may not be helpful. Here art, literature and film take the place of the treatment. Recollection of the memories through film with a plot rooted in the historic event, repetition by actually viewing the film and working through, by coming in terms with them- the same is the effect that the *Harry Potter* series have on the masses. Rowling produces a number of magical objects in the light of her worldview- the Mirror of Erised, Tom Riddle's Diary, The Patronus Charm, the Pensieve, the Memory Charm, and the Golden Snitch- with each one exploring a particular feature of Memory and how to make use of it.

The first of these magical objects that appear in the series is the Mirror of Erised from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. "Erised" being an anagram for "Desire", the mirror reflects the deepest and most desperate desire of the seeker's heart. When Harry accidentally finds the mirror, he finds himself staring at his own family members- the Potters, including his deceased parents. Having lost his parents as an infant, the only way of reconnecting with them was his memories of them- and the mirror became its physical manifestation. "He sits enchanted before it night after night, gazing at its images, until discovered there by Dumbledore, who- readers learn later- has every reason to understand Harry's fascination, haunted as Dumbledore is by his own past" (Wolosky 77). Similarly, in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the central magical object is Tom Riddle's diary. As the story progresses, the reader find out that Tom Riddle was Lord Voldemort himself and he had used Ginny Weasley to open the Chamber of Secrets for him- through the memory of his sixteen year old self, preserved in the diary for fifty years. Through the diary, Riddle also shows Harry his "memories of terrible things" (Rowling 2:179) - but what Harry is shown is not the "truth" of past events but the version that Riddle had told convincingly in his time- and Harry is led to doubt his friend Hagrid and believes him to be the culprit.

Through the creation of both these magical objects, Rowling underscores a very crucial point- that memories can be deceiving, and destructive. In the words of Dumbledore himself, "...this mirror will give us neither knowledge nor truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen... It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that" (1:157). In other words, retrospection that does not have a positive impact on the present, is fruitless. Moreover, trusting the collective memory, or even worse, another's personal memory without making use of one's rationale can be dangerous- memories are powerful, but easily manipulated; one can be fooled by them if their interpretation is not carefully done.

Another magical object of significance here is the Pensieve which collects and sifts through memories for review and inspection. "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure", says Dumbledore, explaining its usage (4:519). Memories collected in the Pensieve can be viewed by a non-participant, from a third person point of view. Since most of the memories collected are usually personal in nature, the potential for abuse is also higher. Here, Rowling discusses the nuances in transferring one's memories into an external medium- in the non-magical world, it happens in the form of diary writing, audiovisual recordings, photographs- a seemingly non-threatening activity. But by revealing its potential for misuse, Rowling highlights how important memories can be. On the other hand, the same can be beneficial in solving crises as well- Dumbledore and Harry sieves through people's memories about Voldemort to study his character- in other words memories utilised for research purposes underscoring its validity. But again, giving the example of Slughorn's tampered memory, Rowling again appeals to the consciousness of the reader to discern between trustworthy sources and the ones that are not.

If Rowling had been cynical in her presentation of memory and its power, the creation of the Patronus Charm and the Flesh Memory of the Golden Snitch advocates the opposite. The Patronus Charm can be analysed in relation to the Dementors (guardians of Azkaban) since they act as binary opposites. The Dementors stand for despair, hopelessness and depression- they feed on a person's happy memories, sense of self and eventually the soul, and leave him/her haunted by disappointments, regrets or bitter memories. The only counter charm to avoid a Dementor's kiss is the Patronus. But to successfully project a Patronus, one requires concentration and focus on an image of joy, or a memory of happiness. If the Dementors embody sorrow, the Patronus embodies happiness- forming binaries.

Here, Rowling is symbolically exploring the nature of positive memories and its powers. The Dementors can be considered as a metaphor for the trauma a person faces. In Harry's case, he hears the scream of a woman- probably his mother's just before her death, which is etched in his memory- when the Dementors attack him. He gets reminded of his childhood filled with violent images of his parents' murder- it is painful, but is also precious because it is the last memory he has of his parents. Through the exploration of Harry's psyche, Rowling by extension comments on the situation of survivors of traumatic memories- they can either be destroyed by it, or accept it and use it as a source of strength; the same can be applied to the survivors of the Holocaust as well. Harry chooses the latter- he uses the memory of his parents itself to conjure

up his Patronus- which takes the form of a stag- the Animagus shape his father James used to transfer into. Thus, memory becomes a protection for him (the word “Patronus” with its Latin roots means “father” or “guardian”). The Patronus can also take the form of a loved one’s memory- as seen in the case of Snape’s Silver Doe representing his eternal love for Lily Evans- the embodiment of his essence of joy.

Other powers of the Patronus, such as sending messages or acting as guide in terms of need confirm the role of “connection” to loved ones- a sense of closeness to others as the counter to despair. The same idea is explored in the Flash memory of the Golden Snitch- the Snitches remember the touch of the first person who handled them. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Dumbledore charms the Snitch into storing the Resurrection Stone in it and passes it on to Harry. In the final scene when he needs help encountering Voldemort, it is this “memory” that comes to Harry’s aid- again highlighting the importance of connection in overturning despair.

In *Deathly Hallows*, Hermione erases her parents’ memory of her- perhaps the most under-appreciated acts of bravery in the series- as she knows memory of her can be used to harm them. Here Hermione, with her bushy brown hair, brown eyes, bookish knowledge and parents who are dentists by profession becomes a play on the Jewish stereotype as opposed to the platinum blonde hair, blue eyes and sharp features of Draco Malfoy, the Aryan stereotype. The use of the Memory Charm draws a direct parallel to the history of Jews who lived in hiding- since Hermione was about to go hunt for the Horcruxes along with Harry and Ron, connection to her lineage would only destroy those whom she loved. The idea here is that a person lives in other people’s minds through memories- and since it could be used as a tool of oppression she erases them.

The Harry Potter Series gives the reader enough space to choose the side he/she wishes to pick- it does not dictate or subscribe to any particular political ideology. Altering from the path of the traditional good vs. Bad children’s story model, and being a Holocaust allegory in the contemporary age is especially significant, in the context of theories about the Holocaust consciousness, the Holocaust industry and other ambivalences and questions regarding the construction of the memory of the trauma- again, the work does not pick sides, but it helps the reader to make an informed choice.

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