

## Existential Plight in Elie Wiesel's Dawn

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Article Received: 03/07/2022, Article Accepted: 08/08/2022, Published online: 10/08/2022, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.3.25

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### Abstract

Eliezer Wiesel was a Romanian born American novelist, Political activist and Holocaust Survivor of Hungarian Jewish descent. He was the author of more than 50 books. The best Known book is *Night*, a memoir that describes his experiences during the Holocaust and his imprisonment in several concentration camps. Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. The Norwegian Nobel committee called him as a "messenger to mankind". This paper attempts to show how the protagonist of Elie Wiesel's *Dawn* Elisha has got the existential questions after his liberation from Hitler's concentration camps. He lost his family members in the concentration camps. He questions the God about his absolute Justice. He questions the people of the world why were they silent? during the killings of Jews. Elisha presupposes not just where God may be located, but also that humans must effectively take God's work into their own hands. Elisha had been taught as a child that murder was forbidden since it amounted to taking one of God's prerogatives. Elisha now believes that the Jewish people must "become God" in order to alter the destiny of their history. Elisha, ironically, comes closer to answering his

questions when he is summoned to serve as an executioner. Elisha's belief in the necessity to "become God" is put to test in Palestine.

I wanted to understand the pure, unadulterated essence of human nature ... I had sought after the truth, and here I was about to become a killer, a participant in the work of ... God. (122)

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Holocaust, Memory, Suffering, Trauma, Witness.

Elie Wiesel's novel *Night* is about a concentration camp prisoner's attempt to cope with the gruesome conditions around him, another classic novel *Dawn* is about a survivor's attempts to come to terms with his post-holocaust reality. Convinced that there is no God to protect him from the cruel world, and no humanity to come to his aid in his hour of need, the protagonist of *Dawn* takes an assertive political stance to

preserve his and his people's interests. This was also the usual reaction of many survivors shortly after their escape. Those survivors enlisted in a variety of terrorist organisations for their own safety. Wiesel reveals many options accessible to survivors and he also speaks how he used them in the novels written following *Night* during a conversation:

All kinds of options were available as suicide, madness, killing, political action, hate, friendship. I note all of these options ... and in each book I explore one aspect. In *Dawn* I explore the political action; in *The Accident*, suicide; in *The Town Beyond the Wall*, madness; in *The Gates of the Forest*, faith and friendship; in *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, history, the return. All the stories are one story except that I build them in concentric circles. The centre is the same and is in *Night*. (*Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, 86)

*Dawn* is a novel set in Palestine that takes place over the course of one night. The novel opens after World War II, and Palestine was occupied by the British. Elisha, the main character, is an eighteen-year-old young man on the verge of turning nineteen. He explains how he came to murder a man.

Elisha is a member of the Movement, a Jewish terrorist organisation whose goal was to expel English forces

from Palestine by whatever means possible. During the war, Elisha was imprisoned in Auschwitz and subsequently Buchenwald, where he lost both of his parents. When he was rescued by the Americans, he fled to France and he was granted asylum there. When he meets Gad, a member of the Movement, in Paris, he is prepared to enlist in the Sorbonne to study philosophy. Gad pays Elisha a visit and urges him to join the Movement, which is in desperate need of new recruits. In the light of his experience, Elisha was looking for the purpose of life and the nature of man. Gad reminds him of Methuselah, the enigmatic messenger of fate. He agrees to join up and relocate to Palestine and is convinced that Gad had appeared at that precise moment to show him the way.

Elisha receives six weeks of severe terrorist training shortly after landing in Palestine. He has also been indoctrinated with the Movement's ideology, which is to get the English out in any way. Elisha participates in a few missions, but they are always in groups. He may have killed someone, but it is unclear because he could never had to kill someone in broad daylight. The Movement's leader, the Old Man, is fed up with British rule in Palestine, where David Ben Moshe was recently sentenced to death by hanging.

Moshe is a Movement member for the tenth he has been sentenced to death. Moshe had been apprehended a month before during a raid organised by Gad. It was a straightforward assignment to obtain weapons from an English base. Due to the bravery of a wounded English sentry, the raid goes astray, resulting in the death of

another member and the capture of David. The Old Man declares that one Englishman would perish for every terrorist executed. He orders kidnapping of an Englishman, preferably an officer, to emphasise his point. Captain John Dawson is the unfortunate victim, who is abducted at night while out alone.

The kidnapping incident draws attention to Palestine, turning Moshe's situation into a global incident. Including John Dawson's mother and some people ask for David's clemency so that John Dawson can be spared. But the British Cabinet rejects, fearful of seeming weak in front of the would-be nationalists elsewhere in the Empire. The Movement takes the same stance as the British Cabinet, believing that if they back down, their credibility would be shattered, and their future actions will be met with scorn.

Moshe appears to be based on the character of a nameless beggar in *Dawn*. Like Moshe in *Night*, he taught the key character Elisha valuable life lessons. He encountered him in his hometown one evening. He was a dark and slender man clothed in slummy black clothes with an odd look in his eyes. After meeting him, Elisha recognised in him the image of a disguised prophet whose sole purpose in coming to earth was to bless all the pure-hearted people with eternal life's joys. He was certain that he was not a genuine beggar. He told him a lot of things to help him overcome his fear of the darkness.

*Night*, according to Elisha, is even purer than day, since it promotes thinking and gives rise to dreams and ideas. The echo of words said during the day can be

heard more clearly and deeply. "Man's tragedy is that he lacks the ability to distinguish between day and night. He speaks things at night that he should not say during the day" (145). He showed him how to tell the difference between day and night and then vanished into the snow.

Elisha hears the message that he has been chosen to put John Dawson to death. This is his first face-to-face assassination attempt. Many thoughts bother him as he waits for daybreak, the moment when the execution will take place. He cannot bear the idea of killing someone who has not done anything wrong to him. All of the people he has known who are now deceased pay him a visit. One of them even resembles the youngster he was before the conflict tore the world apart. He seeks explanations from his fellow members, but all they can do is console him by assuring him that it is a war.

Elisha goes to meet John Dawson with only an hour until daybreak. He is a distinguished and attractive man. When he realises that Elisha is roughly his son's age, he feels sorry for him since he has to make decisions that his kid has never had to make. Elisha wishes he could despise the man, but he cannot do it. He does not want to murder a man in cold blood, so he tries to find something to despise in John, but it is difficult.

John is not greedy nor bad; rather, he is a good man facing an unavoidable fate with courage. He requests Elisha to deliver his letter to his son, and Elisha assures him that he would send it the next day. John wishes that he could tell him a story, but he does not have the opportunity. Elisha shoots

him, and John dies pronouncing the name of Elisha. Everything changes when the darkness dissipates. Darkness has a face, and it is one of the symbols of death. Elisha notices a face in the darkness and recognizes it as his own.

After his liberation from Buchenwald, Elisha, the narrator-protagonist of *Dawn*, is an eighteen-year-old survivor who lives in Paris. He came to Sorbonne to study philosophy because he “wanted to understand the meaning of the events of which I had been the victim” (12). Despite the fact that he is now well cared for by the rescue committee, his previous experience in the concentration camps has left an indelible mark on his mind, prompting him to ask these questions, the answers to which he is eager to discover: “Where is God to be found? In suffering or in rebellion? When is a man most truly a man? When he submits or when he refuses? Where does suffering lead him? To purification or to bestiality?” (12) Furthermore, he is consumed by a sense of guilt and humiliation for not deliberately choosing death like his own people.

After an accidental contact with Gad, a leader of the underground terrorist campaign for the liberation of Palestine, Wiesel is tempted away to enlist as a terrorist at this vital point in his career. The present is too intolerable to him, because of his anguished past and uncertain future. The primary goal of the movement is to force the British out of Palestine in order to realise “the age-old Jewish dream of re-creating an independent home land” for Jews in the post-Holocaust world (*Dawn*, 16). Elisha accepts Gad's offer right away.

He believes God's ideology when the traditional benevolent God has failed to save his chosen people, and the entire humanity has allowed their race to be slaughtered due to their indifference, there is no harm in taking up their own cause for survival. Elisha says, “If in order to change the course of our history we have to become God, we shall become Him” (27).

As a result, the bewildered survivor, who had gone to Paris to use philosophy to unravel and grasp the riddle of Jewish sorrow, joins the resistance movement in the hopes of putting an end to the Jewish people's long history of suffering and persecution. What makes this novel so extraordinary is Wiesel's ability to present compelling arguments in favour of anger and violence in opposition to traditional Jewish quietism. But, towards the conclusion, he appears to be questioning the same violent tactics. This moral problem is exemplified by the survivor near the conclusion of the story, when the protagonist is tasked with assassinating a British commander as a crucial step before achieving his objective.

Following his induction, Elisha and his teammates take part in a number of commando raids and operations on British outposts, occasionally killing a large number of British soldiers. These raids are portrayed as vital for resolving their problem from a political standpoint. As Gad remarks,

It's cruel - inhuman, if you like. But we have no other choice. For generations we've wanted to be better, purer in heart than those who

persecuted us. You've all seen the result: Hitler and the extermination camps in Germany ... But that's all over ... Murder will be not our profession but our duty ... We shall kill in order that once more we may be men. (26)

Throughout Gad's participation in the operation, Elisha was always aware of the fact that what they were doing was not different from what the Nazis and SS soldiers did during the Holocaust. The gravity of his moral issue is brought to the fore. When he is requested to kill a British officer, John Dawson, in retaliation for the British government's potential execution of a captured terrorist, Elisha feels guilty of his murderous deed. This incident in his life exemplifies the moral difficulty that most survivors faced.

Wiesel has attempted to convey the moral conflict experienced by the survivor, who is torn between a sense of loyalty to his country and sorrow over his horrible act. On the one hand, he believes that cruelty can be justified in the name of his nation; on the other hand, no matter how noble and patriotic his intentions are, he could be found guilty of murder on a strictly moral basis.

Thus, after vacillating in the unresolved pain of a moral dilemma all night, Elisha pulls the gun and kills the hostage in the early morning. He speculates after this act, "It is finished. I am a murderer. Elisha has been assassinated by me" (102). Wiesel's attitude is obvious in the novel's ending, where Elisha substitutes

John Dawson with himself. The author appears to believe that Elisha's role in his murder is similar to that of a Nazi executioner. His action simply kills the part of himself that had remained unaffected by his survival. In *Messengers of God*, "Whoever kills, kills his brothers," Wiesel says, "and once one has killed, one is no longer anyone's brother." "One is the adversary" (59).

As a result, the survivor's eagerness for morning paradoxically plunges him into even more darkness. As a result, the novel's title is sarcastic. It is evident when Elisha goes to the window at the end of *Dawn*, hoping to have glimpse the new dawn of Palestine. But the Palestinian dawn he sees is not "red like fire," as Gad had predicted, but has a greyish light the colour of stagnant water" (102), which Irving Halperin so well describes as "neither darkness nor dawn, but the greyness, the ambiguity, of Elisha's suffering" (714).

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**How to cite this article?**

**Y.Raja<sup>1</sup>, Dr.T.Gangadharan<sup>2</sup>** “ Dominant Tradition and Socio-Cultural factors in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Arranged Marriage”, Research Journal Of English(RJOE) 7 (3), PP: 184-189,2022, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.3.25>