

# Delineating Collective Trauma In Alice Hoffman's The World That We Knew

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## Abstract

The World That We Knew, published in September 2019 by Simon and Schuster and written by Alice Hoffman, is a holocaust novel that describes the conditions of Germany and France in the 1940s. The author entwines magic realism with folklore, and the historical period of the Nazi regime, by depicting the brutal conditions faced by each Jewish character in the novel. She got the story's outline from a holocaust survivor she met at a library. Trauma is a psychic wound or an emotional feedback to a harrowing event that disrupts or eludes an individual's ability to cope, potentially causing feelings of dejection and dwindling the sense of individuality. The primary example of trauma faced individually and collectively in a cultural context is the holocaust. The current project tries to explore and analyse the undergoing traumas of each character in the novel with the aid of the trauma theory. The postcolonial setting and other sources responsible for the changing psyche of individual and society are vital in the story. This inspirational story takes place in 1941, at humanity's darkest hour, and follows three fascinating young ladies who must act with fortitude and love in order to live.

**Keywords:** Ettie, holocaust, jews, Lea, Nazi, trauma.

## Introduction

The Holocaust of 1941 saw the traumatic memory of separation and murder in its victims. Collective or group trauma refers to an event that affects a particular group or race. Literature plays a significant role in documenting traumatic experiences and has empowered language to represent an individual's inner and external world. In an introspective novel, the narrator reveals the inner world and pours everything, including their emotions, thoughts and perspectives. Documenting the traumatic events in novels provides a cure to emotional wounds and further knowledge on how to prevent such catastrophes. It outlines the characters' identity and the meaning of the traumatic event.

As an instance of trauma literature, the current project deals with the holocaust novel The World That We Knew written by American novelist Alice Hoffman. Alice Hoffman is a well-known author who has written over thirty novels, three collections of short stories, and eight books for children and adults. The World That We Knew is a historical fiction written in the background of World War Two. Trauma studies began in the 1860s, as psychiatrists noticed unusual behaviour with no apparent cause. In 1896, Sigmund Freud came up with the 'Seduction theory' due to his observation of trauma faced by women. Freud posits two elements as recurring factors seen in traumatic patients. First is the resistance of traumatic patients to speak about their trauma. They do not acknowledge their fears. Herman suggested,

“The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Herman 1).

Freud opines that this conflict is seen in the forced silence of traumatic patients. The second recurring element seen between trauma and the modernist fiction narrative is the connection between trauma through its manifestation as madness. Insanity is often portrayed in modernist trauma fiction. “Forced to experience the shattering effects of unprecedentedly destructive weaponry, mass, mechanised slaughter and inhuman trench conditions, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were seen to suffer breakdowns” (Micale 16).

Apart from Freud, the researchers who analysed trauma include Joseph Breuer, Jean-Martin Charcot, Herman Oppenheim, Pierre Janet and Marton Prince. Freud wrote his early theories in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) with Joseph Breuer. They stated that it was not the events but the remembrance is traumatic. Hence the process of remembrance causes psychological pain, and value is provided to the repressed events in the consciousness. This traumatic remembrance is termed ‘pathogenic remembrance’ for the pathologic symptoms the memory causes (Breuer and Freud 40). Freud, throughout his career, took up the notion of trauma as causing dissociation or a split in the psyche. Cathy Caruth examined the concept of trauma-based on the roles in literature and society in the 1990s. This was considered the first wave of traumatic criticism. It presents trauma as an event that creates contradiction in language and experience.

Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) interprets Freud’s theory on language. She states that the latency and dissociation of the psyche represent a traumatic experience. Latency and dissociation create a temporal gap. Caruth states that trauma is a “shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is, in fact, a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth 61). Later, a pluralistic model analyses the latency and dissociation effect and the cultural dimensions of trauma and narrative expressions. This model

connects the experience, language and social significance of trauma. This approach states that trauma which occurs in specific periods, cultures, bodies and places, relies on external stressors, each emphasising the meaning and representation of traumatic experience. The effects of trauma on identity and memory stand as a central viewpoint. The traumatic memory provides significance to past events. Hence, the traumatic memory narration presents multiple claims and is not bound to the concept of speechless absence.

In this novel, the author uses Jewish folklore and mysticism. The author uses Jewish mythical creatures as a ray of hope to the Jewish characters suffering under the Nazis as well as it is also used to portray the emotions and thoughts of characters. The story centres around three young women, Lea, Ettie and Marianne, along with a golem named Ava, and they struggle to survive against the Germans soldiers at the brink of World War Two in Berlin. The sacred words written on the letter were placed on the golems mouth or head and is brought to life. By removing a letter from the sacred word, the golem is turned into dust and is deanimated. Based on this Jewish legend the author weaves the whole story. The author presents the golem in the story, named as Ava, as a support and help to the main characters in the novel, but later as the story progresses, the golem becomes the saviour and one of the main characters narrates the story in certain chapters. The golem can be an unconscious defensive figurative construct; as Caruth notes:

According to Freud, the evolution of the mind appears to be quite similar to the development of the body at first: consciousness originates from the urge to safeguard the “small piece of vital essence... suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies...” (Caruth 74).

The novel is primarily the story of a 12-year-old Jewish girl Lea Kohn, who fled from Berlin to France in 1941. A German soldier has murdered Lea’s father, a doctor, and her mother Hanni nearly saved her daughter from being

raped. During this time, the German soldiers began to shoot all the Jews they saw. Hanni's mother-in-law Bobeshi's body is paralyzed and cannot walk. Both Hanni and Bobeshi knew that the soldiers would soon come to take them to camp. Hence their only option was to save Lea. Based on the suggestion given by the old woman near their house, Hanni seeks out a Rabbi to create a golem in hope that it can protect Lea. But they won't agree and later the Rabbi's daughter Ettie becomes willing to take that risk. This leads to the next main character, Ettie, who wishes to get out of Berlin with her young sister Marta. Ettie creates Ava the golem, out of mud from the bank of river Spree, infused with Hanni's tears and Marta's menstrual blood. Through reciting the secret Jewish name of God, Ava is brought to life.

### **Personal Trauma and the Consequences of Remembrance**

This however took the war to show me that I was equally accountable for everything I saw as I was for it all I did. The trouble was that you didn't always realise what you were seeing till later, perhaps years later, and that a lot of information never reached it in at all, instead remaining stored in your sight (Herr 4).

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and The Possibility of History* shares the same epigraph from Michel Herr's *Dispatches*. Her intellectual quest into the source and consequences of life's perilous traumatic events can be applied to the chosen text of Alice Hoffman. Her historical fiction *The World That We Knew* (2019), features the character's struggle to survive amid the horrors of the holocaust and brings forth a parable of love, loss of the power to endure. It presents the theme of love, sacrifice, loss, resistance and the determination to survive.

In the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud portrays an apparently recurring pattern of agony in the destinies of select persons. Freud is baffled by the distressingly literal nightmares of wartime survivors and the recurring recreations of individuals who have survived traumas. He is perplexed by the unique and often unreal way in

which tragic events seem to keep rehashing themselves for those who have cleared through them. According to Freud, in certain cases, these iterations are especially striking because they do not appear to be conducted by the individual's own actions, but instead as the hands of some ones by a sort of fate, a sequence of painful events to which they are exposed, and which seem to be completely beyond their desire or control. "The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this," Freud writes, "can be found in the story told by Tasso in the romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*" (Caruth 15):

Tancred, the hero, inadvertently murders his lover Clorinda in a fight while she is dressed as an enemy knight's armour. Following her burial, he enters a weird magical woodland that terrorises the Crusader army. He slices a towering tree with his sword, but blood flows from the wound, as well as the voice of Clorinda, whose spirit is incarcerated in the tree, is audible moaning that he has once again hurt his lover (Freud 1).

The characters in this novel carry with them their memories from their traumatic experiences and the burden of silence. The events are extremely terrible and painful that the victims cannot understand properly or incorporate the events into their normal existence. This chapter gives an analysis of various events that resulted in psychic personal trauma in the character and how each of them endures the emotional pain and struggles to survive. Despite their trauma, the characters in this novel have an immense desire to survive the holocaust because these characters had been saved by their loved ones. Hence, they try to survive by putting aside their emotional pain in order to honour those who sacrificed their lives for them. Cathy Caruth draws mention on the psyche of the victim of trauma in her work:

The actions of Tancred, wounding his beloved in a battle... evocatively represent in Freud's text the way that the experience of a trauma repeats itself... As Tasso's story dramatizes it, the repetition at the heart of catastrophe – the experience that Freud will call "traumatic neurosis" – emerges as the unwitting re-enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind (Caruth 15).

Institutional trauma refers to the trauma that results from the betrayal of the institutions to the people who depends on it for survival violates their trust and wellbeing. The characters in the novel who represent the holocaust victims generally depend on institutions such as government bodies, communities, society, etc. When the government and the social rules that are supposed to protect harm a particular group of people for unethical reasons, it results in 'institutional betrayal'. Society is a blend of several communities, and the social rules are created to maintain peace, order and harmony.

1941, Berlin, spring heralded the darkest times of humanity, where the life of Jews was becoming terrifying as the day passed. In the beginning, the Jews were unaware of the holocaust; hence they endured the discrimination of the Nazi soldiers with the hope that their situation might change in the near future. The Nazis were executing their plan of mass murder slowly and systematically, but when the Jews came to know about the holocaust, they were too late. The author begins the novel by saying: "If you do not believe in evil, you are doomed to live in a world you will never understand. But if you do believe, you may see it everywhere, in every cellar, in every tree, along streets you know and streets you've never been on before" (Hoffman 1).

Hoffman clearly portrays the traumatic situation in Berlin due to the Nazis through these lines. A picture on the evilness is presented by describing that evil is everywhere in Berlin, and one must be cautious about it. After setting the mood of the novel through these lines, the author moves on to present the character Hanni Kohn and portrays her situation in Berlin. She struggles immensely to stay alive in Berlin and, most importantly, to protect her twelve-year-old daughter Lea and her disabled mother Bobeshi. The sole reason for her to stay alive amidst this brutal condition is for her mother and her daughter. The initial state of trauma that occurred in Hanni Kohn's life is by witnessing the murder of her husband, Simon:

Simon, her husband, was slain during a disturbance from outside Jewish Hospital on Iranische Strasse one winter afternoon... A bunch

of thugs murdered him. They took the wedding band from his hands and the boots off his feet. His widow was not permitted to bury him in the cemetery; instead, his bones were utilised as animal fodder (Hoffman 9).

According to Jewish culture, Hanni ripped her clothing, veiled her old house windows, and sat in grief with her mother and daughter for eight days. Simon Kohn had saved 720 people. Even during the riot, he was determined to save the life of a person whom he was treating on that day. He did his duty to save the lives of others with utmost sincerity and honesty. This incident created a condition of psychic trauma; as such, she was constantly in a fight or flight situation. Hanni started to become afraid and cautious of everything. Caruth explains this psychic state of Hanni: "The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives – as I show concretely in my readings of Freud, Duras, and Lacan, as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (Caruth 20)

The soldiers would also soon come to the doorstep to take them to a deportation camp; hence Hanni decides to send her daughter away: "She thought she saw a handsome man on the rooftop in a black jacket. She could call out to him, but what if he was a Nazi? Then she realized he was Azriel, the Angel of Death, whom a mortal is said to see only once in her life" (11).

Ettie constantly rebels against her father and mother for the gender discrimination that is forged upon her. In various situations, she has proved to her father that she is better than any of the boys, but her father forbids her by saying that women are not allowed for the task:

Her father was a famous rabbi, but she was the actual prodigy. She longed she was a male for the thousandth time. She had no desire for marriage or children, just for the world of intellectuals, from which she was barred. As they completed drilling, she could taste the harsh earth and nearly choked on it. She realised there would be no turning back once she disobeyed the boundaries of her family and faith (Hoffman 35).

The climactic events show traits of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the

individuals after their traumatic circumstances. Exposure to severe injury can lead an individual to directly experience the event or witnessing the event in person as it happens to others (e.g., witnessing a kidnapping). This exposition can also occur by discovering that it happened to a close family member or a close friend, or through frequent or intense exposure to disagreeable aspects of the incident. All these conditions were witnessed and experienced by all the major as well as minor characters. According to trauma theory, past experiences and their consequences on the person and future result in a personality change. A specific person undergoes severe trauma, which affects the person and the people around them.

Ettie is so close with her sister Martha, loves her a lot and wants to save her sister from the Nazis; so, she decides to leave Berlin with Martha, leaving her parents behind. Even though it is very traumatic to leave parents, she must do it in order to save her sister. Hanni leaves along with Ava, and a shift in perspectives occurs. The death of her husband Simon had already given her a psychic trauma to Hanni, and now she was going to take one of the most sorrowful decisions to get separated from her daughter. "I beg you for one thing. Love her as if she were your own" (Hoffman 47). After seeing Ava, Bobeshi knew that it was time to part with her dear granddaughter, which traumatized Bobeshi. Bobeshi was not only going through physical pain but also mental. She was never able to walk due to paralysis. The pain of seeing Simon dead already created psychic trauma in her, and now to make the matter worse, she has to say goodbye to her granddaughter, whom she would never see again. Even though she was both mentally and physically worn out, she still kept her courage to convince Lea to go to Paris:

In the midst of the heartbreak of what was to be their last dinner, Hanni took out a small paper box. Inside was a gift she'd planned to give her daughter on her thirteenth birthday. Now she understood that they would not be together on that day (Hoffman 50).

Lea knew that her mother and grandmother were sacrificing their lives for her so that she could live, so it was her duty to stay

alive for them. Hence with heart-breaking emotions, she decides to obey her mother. Hanni sank to her knees, taking the girl's face in her hands. "I need you to do as I say" (Hoffman 49). This was the second traumatic event that was happening in Lea's life. First was the sexual harassment in the alleyway of the street, and the second was the separation between mother and grandmother. Lea was filled with emotions of sorrow and is well depicted by the author in these lines:

Do not cry, do not weep, do not beg, do not demand and don't ask why, do not hold on to her waist, do not throw yourself upon the floor, or hide beneath the bed, or lock yourself in the closest, and spit out words you will regret. Pack your bag and kiss your mother and know what she done for you... turn around and walk out, even if you hear her crying, even if your heart is telling you not to go. Her triumph depends in this. Her triumph is you (Hoffman 52).

Both Lea and Ettie had got separated from loved ones and witnessed death. One's state of mind in helplessness does not allow the person to think rationally and take proper decisions, which often leads to trauma. Lea has always been in a state of trauma after the incident with the soldier. Now that she might never see her mother and grandmother again disturbs her conscious health. She enters in a state of dilemma whether to go with a stranger and leave her mother or not. In her mind, she constantly broods that she would have saved her mother and Bobeshi if she had not listened and stayed. Martha's death completely changes her both physically and mentally such that "for her consciousness then, act of survival and trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life" (Caruth 75).

Trauma in literary criticism raises bigger problems regarding the link between individual and cultural group violence, as well as the interactions between victim, offender, and witness. For example, consider Freud and Lacan's word as both the reappearance of the repressed and a sensation of emptiness. Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*: "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past,

but rather in the way that it's very assimilated nature – the way it is not precisely known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 4).” Caruth's traditional trauma model employs psychoanalytical references for literary criticism in order to prove assertions about trauma's repetitious, oppressive, and dissociative character. The assertions emphasise one of the novel's major points, which relates individual trauma to cultural or historical trauma, which is accomplished in part by depending on a specific neurological approach in psychiatry that depends on a broad understanding of trauma.

### **Collective Trauma, Destabilised Identity and the Social Construction of Meaning**

Traumatic memory may be beneficial for social survival for victims, but it also amplifies existential dread, prompting a quest for meaning and the formation of a transgenerational communal self. This is shown in Hoffman's novel: “No child was safe during the eight days after birth, and circumcision and naming could not occur before that time” (22). The recollection of trauma constitutes a danger to offenders' collective identity, which may be handled by denying history, limiting guilt for wrongdoing, altering the memory of the incident, shutting the door on history, or taking responsibility.

Deriving meaning from trauma is a continuing activity that is regularly mediated within and across societies; it is liable for conflicts about memory, but it also offers the possibility of creating a foundation for interethnic understanding. With this in mind, Hoffman makes children the novel's protagonists: “In ‘The Book of Light’ it had been written that true compassion and true love existed only among children and for children” (22).

Besides Lea, the next major character in the novel is Ettie. Ettie is described as a strong young beautiful girl who wants to be like a father but is denied to fulfil her dream just because of her gender. She was more talented than her father but was unrecognized by others. Ettie was more courageous and talented than her father. Her father was a great rabbi, but she was the one who had true talent (Hoffman 32).

In her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth highlights how trauma victims may pass on their trauma to others. Researchers in California find out that trauma marks can be passed on from one person to another. The author concluded through the findings, as well as supported for the “epigenetic explanation”. The concept is that trauma can place a chemical mark on a person's genes, which is then handed right down to the next generation. This is evidently observable during the genocide, where the children were most vulnerable. Many died due to starvation, hygiene and lack of health.

Furthermore, the silence can also be observed in terms of a grave marker, in the sense that in a huge mass genocide like the holocaust, which left so many dead with no physical remains to mourn or bury. The individual is only left with the memories of the dead. And silence is considered as a mark to mourn the loss. Elie Wiesel, a Romanian-born American writer, professor, activist, Nobel Laureate and a holocaust survivor, comments: “In the beginning there was silence and no words. The word itself is a breaking out. The word itself is an act of violence; it breaks the silence” (Wiesel 119). The novel's characters stand as a fundamental example of this.

All four characters in Hoffman's novel are given the same tickets to Paris. As a result, Ettie, Martha, Lea and Ava meet at the train and shares the same compartment. As the Nazi soldiers stop the train near France's border, Ettie and Martha make a run to the forest. But Martha is shot by a soldier and dies while Ettie is crying hard, keeps on running to the forest until she collapses and falls. Meanwhile, Lea and Ava stay on the train and Lea is saved by the golem Ava. They continue their journey to Paris, where they finally reach their destination at Hanni's cousin Levi's residence.

At this point in the novel, the author presents several basic details and facts about the war, genocide and various resistance groups. She founded herself on the outskirts of the small city of Vienne in the Rhone-Alpes region, which is twenty kilometres away from Lyon. This was the city where the Hannibal had arrived, and the Romans held chariot races around ‘La Pyramide’

(Hoffman 78). The mental condition of Ettie is presented as she begins to feel the heat of her sister's body next to her. She could feel Martha's heartbeat and voice. After his sister's death, Ettie had torn her clothes, but she hadn't upheld the traditional mourning period of Shiva, which lasted for seven days (Hoffman 79). Ettie's grief had completely transformed into a vengeful one. She took a sharp knife from the kitchen. In the shed where she slept, she cut an M into her arm in memory of her sister so that she would always remember what she was fighting for (Hoffman 80). The only thing that she wanted was revenge. Hence after a lot of effort, she finds a resistant group and meets Victor, the brother of Julien.

They joined an underground group that rescued young people, foreign Jews, and children. They fought against the Germans, creating as much chaos as possible through handmade bombs, destroying roads and trains. The traumatic event had changed her mind and reflected on her body. People barely glanced at her; she was thin and unkempt, with a haunted look in her eyes, no one worth looking at. This was the way she wanted it (Hoffman 80). It is clearly observable through the above-noted events that both Lea and Ettie were suffering through Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and survival symptoms.

## Conclusion

Personal and collective trauma have tremendous implications in Alice Hoffman's novel *The World That We Knew*. As the globe evolves, so do the literature, bound records, and lifestyle of a region and its inhabitants. Trauma has been present in all kinds of writing in some shape or another. It depicts the gloomy side of our tale, which influences a history, memoir, the author's anxieties and sufferings, or the characters produced.

Today's definition of trauma includes not just life-threatening or emotionally unpleasant occurrences, but also situations, day-to-day encounters, or activities that might lead to mental foibles. Centuries have passed, yet human situations have not changed. In certain circumstances, increased unfaithfulness, helplessness, dread, and lack of self-control are

direct consequences of trauma. Sexually assault, domestic violence, child abuse, poverty, abuse, natural calamities and catastrophic events, disease outbreaks and pandemics, death of loved ones, social and religious hatefulness, disaffection or desperately superficial, chaos and violence witnessing, etc. are the most common causes of traumatic sentiments.

To represent the reality of people living in the society, the author needs to show the inner world of the characters along with outer realities. As far as *The World That We Knew* by Alice Hoffman is concerned, it is one of the finest works of traumatic historical fiction. The novel is set during the onset of holocaust at Berlin and ends with the commencement of the year 1944 with the end of the holocaust and the liberation of several concentration camps. Millions of Jews were murdered through various gas chambers, the most popular among them being the Auschwitz. Through the character the Nazi Captain, the author provides the image of all those brutal things that the leaders did during this time. The women were brutally raped and murdered. The most vulnerable were the children who died due to starvation and there were labor camps in which men were forced to work without hygiene, food and medical care till they died. All the bodies were burned together. For example, in the novel, Hanni Kohn's husband Simon's body was used as animal feed. The people didn't even get a chance to mourn. Such was the conditions faced by the Jews under the Nazi regime. The psychic hardships that they had suffered during the deportation were unbearable. The consequences of these situation result in psychosomatic nature that shows that the survivors are in dire need of health care.

Alice Hoffman's accounts of trauma is successful in keeping the readers arrested to the development of each character. This novel is a brilliant piece of work contributing to trauma literature with pure trauma content. The novel is based on the experiences of the protagonist, which may be positive or negative. *The World That We Knew* is fit to be analysed with the help of trauma theory. Whole novel contains only one theme and this work of literature is totally devoted to that theme, which is 'trauma'.

Through Cathy Caruth and Sigmund Freud's trauma theories, it is evident that *The World That We Knew* elegantly asserts the importance of comradeship and social cooperation to heal the wounds of trauma in individual and collective psyche.

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