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An Alternative History of Holocaust: New Historical Reading in Gerda W. Klein's *All*

But My Life

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Abstract

The present research analyzes the memoir All But My Life authored by one of the female holocaust survivors, Gerda W. Klein, in order to argue that her autobiographical accounts on the lived holocaust experiences both as a victim and witness extends the mainstream representation of holocaust history by including the double victimization of Jews female in the concentration camp during the period of Nazism. The mainstream discussion of holocaust history has always been occupied by male writings with the dominant focus on men's experiences recognized as a representative of Nazis history but there has been rare engagement with the nature of Jewish women's holocaust sufferings. The latter's traumatic holocaust sufferings is overlooked as the insignificant private experience. As an autobiographical literary artifact, Gerda's memoir alternatively records the distinct version of Nazis' treatment towards women in the form of emotional harassment, physical torture, rape, sexual abuse, forced indoor labors along with the bonding of sisterhood among the women as an instrument for the resistance unlike anything male went through. In order to further strengthen the argument, the researcher incorporates the theoretical insights from New Historicism by Michael Foucault and other leading new historicists so that the mainstream history of holocaust is revised to be inclusive through women's victimization along with the theoretical ideas from gender trauma theory in the establishment of the authentic history. In this way, the paper concludes with the findings that the nature of traumatic holocaust experience is gendered.

Keywords: Alternative History, Holocaust, New Historicism, Gender Trauma

The present research paper makes a decent investigation in a memoir *All But My Life* by one of the Holocaust women survivors, Gerda W. Klein in order to examine into how her narrative offers an alternative picture of the discourse of holocaust from the perspective of the Jewish women's lived experiences rather than the mundane analysis from Nazi's or Jewish men's perspective. In doing so, the research argues that the evil practice of holocaust massacre was not as same with Jews women as it was with the Jews men. It further explores the role of the gender difference because of which the women's experiences of holocaust domination differed from that of man.

While the mainstream representation of the holocaust history emphasized the man's experience of physical and mental tortures, extermination, starvation and outdoor labor, but the women's experiences of sexual harassment, rapes, infected menstruation, emotional abuse, physical violence and indoor slavery remained excluded from the male's narrative about the holocaust. Thus, the present research attempts to discover the women's version of holocaust nightmare through the close observation within Gerda's narration on her personal experiences along with those women who shared the similar fate with her.

The memoir *All But My Life* narrates the tragic moments that Gerda along with her family underwent when the Hitler's discourse of Nazism began to capture the Jews and exterminate them inhumanly. Many holocaust narratives reflected the horrible situation of Jews in Germany but this memoir gives us the picture of how Nazis expanded themselves by invading the Poland and captured those Jews. The gruesome tortures faced firsthand by Gerda's family gives the historical picture of how Nazism expanded their genocidal discourse into the soil of Poland. Gerda begins her narrative by portraying the peaceful life before the attack of the SS soldiers. Then,

she moves forward depicting the circumstances that eventually led her and how her family moved to the concentration camps. Her explanation shows how the male members including her brother, Arthur, were firstly chosen by Nazis soldiers and deported to the camps. Gradually, they started detaining female and forced them into the indoor works. Her father and mother were taken to unknown camp and she was pushed into a group of girls.

During the imprisonment in the four walls of the concentration camp, all girls were compelled to undress themselves before the soldiers. Some sick soldiers used to demand the pretty and healthy girls for their sexual enjoyment. They had to indulge into the indoor works such as knitting, weaving, cleaning and washing so that the military garments are supplied sufficiently. Gerda and other girls befriended and shared their stories to empower themselves to forget the painful treatment. They would perform the play by being mother and grandmother and bring smiles on their faces despite the harsh circumstances. In spite of day and night works, they were not provided an adequate food. Yet, they formed a kind of motherly relation and sisterhood and divided the breads among all. Due to lack of nutrition as well as other supplies, Gerda had to resist the extreme pain during menstruation. Most of her friends suffered irregular menstruation. The soldier would entice them for sexual favor in exchange of food. If any women did a mistake while knitting in machine, she would be beaten to bleeding.

Gerda and her friends were deported from one camp to another with new brutal treatment at new places. Still, they remained bonded and helped each other. While bathing, the soldier used to break in and stroked them for sexual pleasure. Many girls were sterilized. Silence was their only weapon. Gerda experienced and saw such sexual violence and other inhuman forms of emotional harassment which

documents the women's version of holocaust that was never addressed in male's writings. The memoir ends with the liberation of Jews from the American armies. Gerda also shares her love story when she fell in love with Kurt Klein, an American soldier who cared and nurtured her after liberation.

Many discussions on the Jews men or Nazi's male's writing and their representation of the holocaust history have been the subject in the mainstream academic as well as non-academic discipline. However, there has rarely been any research on the victimization of women being captured and tormented during the disgraceful time of holocaust.

The mainstream holocaust writings have been dominated by the contents exclusively concerned with the male's memory of physical violence, starvation, extermination, mental harassment etc. Little has been explored on the influence of the gender difference that determined Nazism's behavioral oppression of Jews and the silence of female holocaust survivors due to the patriarchal tradition of marginalizing women's experiences as private and thus, insignificant experiences. The traumatic holocaust experiences encountered by male and female are universal and it cannot be doubted. Yet, the literary discussion on the representation of women's holocaust realities could not find a deserving space until late 1990s when some female survivors seriously penned down their oppressed holocaust-related traumatic sufferings by the means of autobiographical memoirs and fictional narratives:

No scholars studying the Holocaust deny the universal sufferings of male and female prisoners: however, the ways in which they suffered were often gendered. I argue that the specific, gendered suffering women experienced during the Holocaust delayed the recording of their experiences for many decades, during which time language evolved for women to discuss the

suffering, resulting in the increasing publication of Holocaust memoirs by women in the 1990s. (Latimar11)

In the given observation, Shana, during her research on holocaust experiences in memoirs, identifies that the holocaust experiences, however traumatic they must have been in degree, faced by male and female during concentration camps are gendered. She further explores that the gendered conditions of the women as a female and racial conditions as a Jew bounded the different form of victimization onto women as compared to men.

After the liberation, many male survivors made an immediate recognition of their holocaust experiences but women lacked the social privilege to document their private traumatic experiences because of the male-dominated tradition of writings that devalue women's experiences as insignificant. Like the lines observed, it was during the time of the 1990s when some female survivors raised the pen to script their holocaust experiences. It was largely the influence of the then feminist movement the agenda of which introduced the separate discipline of language for women's expression of personal feelings and emotions.

Reading Gerda Klein's memoir and her realistic experiences during her tragic time in camp excite anyone to inquire upon the women's victimization by Nazism. After reading the memoir, the question about the difference in terms of the nightmare of the holocaust experience shared between male and female Jews in the concentration camp during the dark period of Nazism comes to the surface with the gravity of seriousness.

Victimization of Jews women during the holocaust time through different forms of sexual violence such as rape, emotional harassment, physical torture, infected and irregular menstruation due to lack of sanitary supplies and water,

sterilization, sisterhood among Jews women to help each other and their silence at any form of heinous treatment as narrated by Gerda seems to offer an alternative history of holocaust that never found any place in male's representation of Nazism. Gerda seems to offer an alternative history of holocaust that was never found in Nazi's or in Jews men's writings. This alternative history brings the real victimization of Jews women into the discussion. The researcher hereby explores into the innermost sufferings and struggles of the Jews women through the narrative of Gerda's witness and experiences for which the research deals with the textual analysis in depth.

The text itself is its primary reading method for analysis, this will be accomplished in the light of New Historicism as a methodological tool to argue how the mainstream representation of holocaust history from the male's perspective fail to reflect the totality of Nazism discourse for the male's narrative can not address the variations of women's holocaust realities. Thus, applying New Historicism attempts to question the male's reflection of holocaust as central truth and offer an alternative account of women's holocaust experiences that deal with sexuality, motherhood, menstruation, sisterhood, domesticated labor exploitation etc as Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman in their book that pays a close observation on the role of gender in the difference of holocaust experiences argues in the beginning of the book about the importance of listening to women's holocaust narratives in order for the fuller understanding of the holocaust history: "Why women? Why should a book on the Holocaust- which targeted all Jews for annihilation irrespective of their sex or age or any other social characteristic – focus on women? This book shows how questions about gender lead us to a richer and more finely nuanced understanding of the Holocaust" (1). Here, the two gender trauma critics hold the assumptions that the complete understanding of holocaust history can be derived from the combined

analysis of the traumatic holocaust experiences faced by male and female Jews.

Furthermore, Foucauldian New Historical concept of discourse will be incorporated as a theoretical instrument to discuss the power politics which critically reflect on how women's experiences of holocaust were underrated because of gender. New historical analysis will be extensively carried out in reference to the protagonist of the memoir to establish and strengthen the major argument that the nature of women's holocaust experiences differs from that of men and hence, offers an alternative frame for the complete history of Holocaust.

The genocidal discourse of Holocaust begins in the alignment with the beginning of the Nazism in the historical context of Second World War. The founder of the political system of Nazism was Hitler, the then autocratic ruler whose directive of the Jews extermination as a gesture of retaliation against the loss it suffered in the First World War spread the propaganda of nationalism. His narrative of 'One color one race' that valued Aryan race alleging the Jews as the reason for the failure of German in the war constructed the provocative practice of anti-Semitism. As he ascended to the power, he declared the extermination of Jews from the soil of German and ordered the construction of the concentration camps for the gasification of the weaker ones. His genocidal policy was aimed at exploiting Jews as the means for the production of products which help German recover from the economic crisis that it suffered in the First World War. Under his directive, Nazi SS soldiers were deployed to capture the Jews of all age groups and load them into the concentration camps:

All in all, the holocaust originated from a century-old unbroken tradition of European anti-Semitism, which manifestation in Germany is determined by the emergence of the nationalist socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) and the establishment of a totalitarian, fascist regime which political agenda

included the plan to exterminate the European Jews during the Second World War. (Mill 5)

Such genocidal act of extermination of all Jews to destroy the existence was further carried out by the cultural discourse of 'one color one race'. This Anti-Semitist instigated the division between Jews and Aryan dragging to the development of hatred, bigotry, discrimination and the genocidal thoughts about the Jews. As a political step taken by Hitler, Holocaust as a genocidal crime devastated and destroyed the millions of Jews leaving many survivors under traumatized conditions:

The term Holocaust refers to genocide through the killing of approximate 6 million European Jews between 1941 and 1945. In particular, the Holocaust is defined by the singular nature of the systematic, administrative mass murder committed by Nazi Germany and its collaborators to exterminate the European Jews and other groups, of which major parts of the German and European population were killed due to the intent to destroy these groups, such as political opponents, homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses, Poles, Romani, Soviet prisoners of war, and persons with mental or physical disabilities. (Mill 4)

In these lines, the history and the purpose of holocaust as a genocidal system of exterminating Jews is clearly briefed. Holocaust was a political game against the Jews which was the crime against the value of humanity. Indeed, it was an enemy to the humanity because it violated the ethics of kindness, generosity and mutual feeling of brotherhood. Instead, the totalitarian ruling of Nazism promoted the essence of anti-Semitism and radicalizes the discriminative mindset of racial difference leading finally to the death of humanity. The Jews who were physically and mentally tortured, harassed, oppressed and gasified alive developed the traumatic experiences that overwhelmed the life. Trauma as a mental and neurotic response paralyzed the

surviving instincts of the Jews that eventually objectified their lives with only physical object in the form of lifeless body but no emotional will to live.

Holocaust experiences are traumatic in nature because hallucinating, overwhelming and uncontrollable that frequently trigger and haunt the memory of the survivors. One of the leading trauma theorists is Cathy Caruth who coined the term 'trauma' in her famous theoretical work "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History". This theoretical essay institutionalizes the medical condition of trauma formally and baptized the terminology as a mental response and a neurotic disorder. Characterizing the nature and source of traumatic experiences, Caruth defines trauma as: "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (81). In this pioneering definition, Caruth distinguishes traumatic experiences from any daily painful experiences by exploring the nature of the traumatic shock as a mental reactions and neurotic disorder which derive from the direct encounter with the catastrophic events and circumstances. These traumatic effects are more repetitive, overwhelming and uncontrollable.

Such traumatic experiences are so powerful and uncontrollable that the individuals can't easily cope up with them. They paralyze and overwhelm the person's life to the level that they remain unable to carry out their ordinary activities. Once they occur following the sudden catastrophic events, they linger on victimizing the persons. The emotional impact resulted from traumatic attack is seriously threatening and horrifying.

While recognizing that the traumatic experiences are more psychological because they don't get manifested physically, Caruth further argues that the

representation of traumatic experiences in its direct expression is impossible because there is the discrepancy between the traumatic events and the memory of the victim. She cites the biological case as the primary reason why the traumatic experiences can't be exactly narrated. The traumatic occurrences in the firsthand are beyond the individual's understanding and explanation but they remain unconscious of what happens during the course: "Caruth argues that trauma as it first occurs is incomprehensible. It is only later, after a period of latency, that it can be placed in a narrative" (Berger 577). Here, the lines on Caruth theoretical argument shed a clear light on the claim that the traumatic occurrences are not reachable and understandable during the time of occurrence. The victims suffer from the biological obstruction in the form of temporary memory breakdown due to which the persons become unable to trace back to the traumatic moments. There lies no possibility of remembering the exact details of how everything occurred.

It is after certain period of time that the victims recall the traumatic events and fall prey to its frequent haunting. This period is what Cathy Caruth categorizes as the *Latency period*: "period during which the effects of the experiences are not apparent" (183). It is during the time of latency when the survivors start processing their traumatic experiences but still can't fully replicate the actual manifestation of how the traumatic events look like. Yet, for Caruth, it is the time of latency when the trauma survivors retrieve their traumatized memories and frame them into the narrative, be it through the fictional narratives or the realistic form of expression like memoirs such as *All But My Life* by Gerda. However, the manifestation of latency period was immediate for the male because the male holocaust survivors started documenting their holocaust memories in different means of narratives right after the liberation from the concentration camps but female survivors' latency delayed because of the

socio-cultural conditions of the male-dominated society that privileged the male's writings as the authentic and representative.

In her critical observation over the biased tradition of holocaust writings and representation, Louise O. Vasvari identifies, "Holocaust scholarship still tends to privilege the Holocaust experience of men as universal and is reluctant to acknowledge testimony that does not follow preconceived gender stereotypes and suitable female behavior or pre-existing narratives of survival" (2). Here, Louise intensely disclosed the interworking of the patriarchal traditions of writings and its specific expectations of the conventional roles of women do not conform to the traumatized holocaust realities of the Jews women whose gruesome holocaust experiences seem to contradict the preconceived behavior and roles of women as an ideal, pure, beautiful and virgin etc. It is the reflection of how patriarchal distribution of power relations in which the male hold the superior powers in all works of life discredited the presence of women's holocaust narratives into the mainstream representation. Thus, the history of holocaust suffers a serious lapse due to the dominance of men's narratives and the exclusion of women's holocaust history which is strengthened by the power politics of the society that valorizes the men's position. Such a play of the hegemonic structure of the power relations is the area of discussion for the theoretical work called New Historicism that rejects the mainstream history because it is manipulative and constructed.

The history of holocaust writing or the mainstream representation of Nazism holocaust and Jews men writing has been unkind to women's horrendous experiences of concentration camp. Holocaust literary writings has always been dominated by the contents of men that partially concern with the way men endured the Nazism's deplorable practice of inhumanity. But, it failed to address the painful sufferings that

the women had to undergo. No literary discourse on holocaust history attempted to question the impact of gender and traditionally accepted roles assigned to women which determined the nature of oppression they faced during the camp as S. Lillian Kremer argues, "Male critics, although recognizing important literary contributions by women, neglect gender issues in their holocaust writings" (qtd. in Sheng 241). In response to it, present research analysis on Gerda's witness from her memoir *All But My Life* in the light of New Historicism deconstructs the historical representation of men's version of holocaust experience and complete it by incorporating the women's experience of inhuman treatment: "New Historicism argues that there is no universal meaning or truth in history and that meaning imputed to history reflects power relations at the time of writing as well as the time of events' occurrence" (Hoover 356). Like these lines contend, even the history of holocaust writings seems to have been affected by the patriarchal attitudes towards women's writings which are often overlooked as insignificant. Identifying the existing societal gender views upon the women's writings as the main cause behind the underrepresentation of women's holocaust experiences, Sara R. Horowitz claims:

It is not that women survivors have failed to produce diaries, memoirs, journals, novels, or vignettes; in fact, many have recorded their experiences in writing or in oral and videotaped testimony. Nevertheless, women's experiences are rarely presented as "typical" Holocaust stories; scholarly studies cite female accounts less frequently than the testimony of male survivors. (258)

These lines evidently speak of the fact that the existing social perspective on gender played crucial roles in undermining the women's accounts as trivial ones and men's writings as an authentic representation. It vividly exposes the dominance of male's

presence owing to the patriarchal discourse of power politics in society that privileges male like Foucault asserts, "Discourse is controlled, limited, defined and exercised by power and draws to the way boundaries between the true and false are erected within the context" (42). The Foucault's concept of discourse refers to the systematic set of thoughts and beliefs that have been constructed in the society by those holding the higher spectrum of power. The powerful ones construct the discourse and exercise them in the society in order to establish the absolute truth which is always designed to serve in their vested interests.

This discourse is mediated and communicated time and again so that it gets naturalized in the society and no question is raised against it. Any discourse in the society is inherently manipulative because it contains the influence of the hegemonic structure of power which constructs the narratives in the favor of the powerful ones. Therefore, the new historicists claim that the mainstream historical truth is monotonous and thus, incomplete. So, the new historicists further suggest that there is no absolute historical truth but the closeness to the truth is possible through the alternative accounts. They argue for the rethinking and resituating of the mainstream history. When talking about the impossibility of representing mimetic representation of trauma history, Cathy Caruth, in the new historical line, suggests to get closer to the truth by relocating the established mainstream truth through the vehicle of alternative trauma accounts: "Through the notion of trauma...we can understand that a rethinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding may not*" (182). Here, Caruth defends the new historical echo that it does not suggest to reject the mainstream history but to seek for the alternative historical accounts that further supplement to make the historical truth

more plausible and compatible.

While the masculine tradition of holocaust writings establishes the traumatic truth of the men, it failed to equally recognize the women's holocaust trauma. Following what Caruth contends as an alternative history, looking at Gerda's traumatic accounts on holocaust experiences of women during the brutal treatment in the concentration camps offers adequate testimonials to resituate the canonical representation of men's holocaust history and relocate it to be more inclusive and objective by including the women's traumatic holocaust experiences.

Reading Gerda's accounts based on her lived experiences and witness during her hostage in concentration camps contradicts our knowledge of the way the leading male holocaust writers such as Primo Levi, Elli Wiesel documented the picture of the holocaust atrocity. While male's writings exclusively deal with the Nazism's physical exploitation of them in doing physically demanding outdoor works and other forms of physical tortures such as whipping, beating, shooting, quenching up the thirst with urine and so on, and female's writings reflect the fundamental difference in terms of the way they were treated. Due to the influence of the gender difference, women's experiences of camp mostly dealt with the sexuality, motherhood, menstruation, and the domesticated indoor works. One of the holocaust critics, Myrna Goldenberg points out:

Women's memoirs are dominated by images and anecdotes of horrific violence related to sexuality. No less prominent are their discussions of sterility as well as their fear of menstruating, their status as mothers of newborns, their vulnerability to rape, and their response to gender-based humiliations, such as nakedness in front of men, body shaves, and internal body searches. (79)

These accounts are sufficient to contend how different women's victimization was in comparison to men. For more textual evidences, the accounts offered by two famous male holocaust writers namely Elli Wiesel and Primo Levi in their holocaust works entitled *Night* and *If This a Man* respectively sheds a clear light on the effect of gender difference in the course of Nazis violence.

In *Night*, Wiesel describes the brutal physical assaults and beatings that he and his father suffered. He was a small boy then. He presents the gruesome picture of how his father was physically tortured until he died at the end. In the following narrative lines, he describes a scene in which the SS guard threatens his and brutally bruises him when he saw the guard copulating with a Polish girl, one of the women inmates in the camp:

An Ordinary inmate doesn't have the right to mix with other people's affairs.

One of you doesn't seem to have understood this point. I shall therefore try to make him understand clearly once and for all.

I felt the sweat running down my back.

"A-7713!"

I stepped forward.

"A crate!" he ordered.

They brought a crate.

"Lie down on it!" on your belly!"

I obeyed.

I no longer felt anything except the lashes of the whip. (57)

In this scene of physical violence, it's clear that the girl was manipulated by the SS guard as an object of sexual fulfillment whereas Wiesel was physically beaten as a male. The Polish girl was sexually harassed whereas Wiesel was physically punished.

Here, Wiesel focuses more on his physical punishment with no description on how traumatic the Polish girl must have felt during her sexual exploitation.

Likewise, In *If This is a man*, Primo Levi describes the physical tortures and hard works he was forced to do along with other males. His description is very touchy and moving. The following narrative lines from the book give us the picture of how outdoor physically-demanding works the men had to do without any rest:

Today we have to unload an enormous cast-iron cylinder from the wagon: I think it is a cylinder tube and will weigh several tons...it is dangerous, one dare not let one's attention wander, a moment's oversight is sufficient to find oneself crushed ...for me it is torture, the load maims my shoulder-bone. After the first journey I am deaf and almost blind from the effort" (73).

These lines are very heart-rending and moving. It reflects the painful physical endurance that men had to undergo during the Nazis atrocity. However, Gerda's accounts of holocaust experiences reflect a different version of Nazis atrocity. Her experiences along with her female inmates are mostly affected by their gender as a female. Thus, male holocaust writings hardly include women's holocaust experiences.

Gerda, in her memoir, also narrates the horrendous events and incidents when she along with other girls was sexually abused. They even suffered the irregular and infected menstruation due to lack of water and sanitary supplies. Her witness also shows how the girls were sterilized by SS soldiers:

We had heard that in some camps girls had been forcibly sterilized. That thought filled me up with unspeakable horror. Many girls in our camp no longer had their monthly periods because of their poor nutrition. Few of them seemed concerned. It was always a problem to contrive sanitary supplies, to collect sufficient paper and sometimes bits of wood shavings to be wrapped in

paper. Of course, no sanitary supplies were obtainable officially. (Gerda 155) Likewise, the sexual harassment and emotional blackmail was very common. Gerda shares an instance when she was provoked by one officer for sexual favor in the exchange of food in adequate amount. During the camp, women were not given sufficient food. Starvation for weeks was very common form of punishment. The officer enticed her for sexual indulgence taking the advantage of her hunger "Come, come. Surely you don't get enough to eat there...Apples, sausage, warm soup, And for all that, I don't want much from you" His voice changed abruptly. "Don't pretend to be stupid, or one might think you are as lady" (Gerda 148). The officer even threatened her about her pitiable condition after her rejection as Karin Doerr argues, "the absolute power of the Nazis over their [female] victims was often expressed through sadism and sexual violation" (60). This review further reflects the working of the patriarchal discourse even in the Nazism.

The then German society was too male-dominated. Such male oriented society treated women as a mere object of entertainment and sexual fulfillment. The narrative lines below by Gerda when she was transported to camp show animalistic treatment of male Nazi officers. It deeply uncovers the working of Nazis' patriarchal gender attitude towards Jews women. Women, as is seen in all patriarchal societies, are objectified as the means of sexual pleasure and amusement:

I was among the last twenty-five girls. we were told to undress completely. I was rebellious and furious, but we did as we were told. We were then marched into the dining hall. I clenched my fists and stood erect. My body burned. I closed my eyes to blot out their staring. I was given a number-895A-and told to dress and go to my bunk. When I got there I was relieved to see Ilse. No one was yet sure of the meaning of the examination. It was said that there were

many sick and wounded soldiers who needed the amusement that pretty and healthy girls could provide. (179)

Nazis' treatment and attitude towards Jews women were heavily and internally guided by the discourse of patriarchy that projected women as sexual object. This is the reason why many Jews women were subjected to the unspeakable form of sexual violence. Rape, physical harassment, emotional torture and sterilization were very common forms of sexual victimization that Jews women went through but never were recorded in the mainstream representation of holocaust history.

Gerda and other girls were transported from camp to camp and they were forced into the domestic indoor works. They had to engage in knitting, weaving, washing and cleaning:

We weaving white silk for parachutes and again were warned against possible mistakes which would be considered sabotage. Handling four looms was very hard since the thousands upon thousands of fine silk threads shone like liquid silver and reflected million fold the lights overhead. It was most difficult to notice when a thread broke and got entangled in the fabric. During those ten months on the night shift in Landeshut my eyes suffered seriously and always burned and itched unmercifully (Gerda 154).

Even though it looked easier in comparison to outdoor physical works, women used to be severely punished if they committed a minor mistake. During their work in the machines, there was probable chance to contract the tuberculosis. They used to x-ray them every two months and tuberculosis infected were immediately sent to Auschwitz for the incineration in gas chamber. "Each time a number were found to have contracted tuberculosis; they were immediately sent to Auschwitz" (Gerda 170). Once the women and girls contracted any of the health problems, they used to be useless

and be forced into the gas chamber for the incineration. Being thrown into the process of gasification after being useless physically was commonly shared fate for both men and women in the times of the camp. However, the way they were treated and the kind of work they were forced to do set the difference between the holocaust experience experienced by Jews male and female.

Unlike men's ways of coping up with Nazism's brutality by either escaping or obeying their physical instructions, women victims often formed a relation of sisterhood and shared their past memories along with the kitchen recipe. They used to share the bread among all. Differentiating between men's and women's resistance to Nazism with the latter developing traditional values of cooperating as mother-child and sisterly relationship, Myrna Goldenberg argues:

Starving male and female prisoners dealt with their hunger from different perspective. Deprived of food, men fantasized about splendid meals of the past, but women survivors reported that they exchanged recipes and menus and discussed ways they stretched food to make ends meet. Neither men nor women satisfied their hunger, but the approach that women took was creative, allowing them to use their previous experience and imagination and prepare for the future. (88)

Gerda, in the memoir, narrates the moment when she along with other girls used to organize a play and act it out among the girls "Sunday was our day of leisure. We usually sat around and talked, slept, or invented games to play" (Gerda 156). They even shared their knowledge of kitchen skills "Hungary and without anything to do, the girls began to speak of food, exchanging recipes for the richest pastries" (Gerda 195). Gerda's close friendship with Suse, Ilse and other girls despite being from unfamiliar backgrounds testifies how they bonded with each other. Gerda sacrificed

everything to help Ilse, her newly-bonded sister, walk to next camp without SS soldier's brutality. They shared and lived all hardships together without being separated.

Men's holocaust experiences and sufferings rarely describe the intensity of the pains and sufferings that Jews women had to go through as a female and a mother. Most of the writings representing holocaust history come from the male's perspective. Women's holocaust writings came much later:

No scholars studying the Holocaust deny the universal sufferings of male and female prisoners: however, the ways in which they suffered were often gendered. I argue that the specific, gendered suffering women experienced during the Holocaust delayed the recording of their experiences for many decades, during which time language evolved for women to discuss the suffering, resulting in the increasing publication of Holocaust memoirs by women in the 1990s. (Latimer 11)

In these lines, Shana clearly shows the reasons why women's holocaust experiences are different from men's and how women's writings about their holocaust experiences were not given any social privilege until much later. The society was male-oriented society in which the men held importance in the social sphere. Male's experiences were valued as the mainstream experiences and represent the authentic public history. So, the history of holocaust was only believed to be men's experience of holocaust. Since the patriarchal discourse of society gave more power and supremacy on men as a public figure, women's experiences never found recognition in the mainstream representation of holocaust history as Michele Foucault, the father new historicism, argues;

...As regards Marxism, I'm not one of those who try to elicit the effects of

power at the level of ideology. Indeed I wonder whether before one poses the question of ideology; it wouldn't be more material to study first the question of the body and the effects of power on it. Because what troubles me with those analyses which priorities ideology is that there is always a presupposed human subject endowed with a consciousness which power is then though to seize on. (58)

Here, in these lines, Foucault makes a point of departure from the Marxist concept of ideology and further proposes his idea about the presence of power everywhere. He contends that the power relation or relation of force is found everywhere and thus, the individual subject is always subjected to some kind of power system. It is exercised through the construction of the discourse. The constructed discourse as a system of consciousness or thought creates a set of beliefs and practices which seize the thinking of the powerless and are subjugated. The discourse of the patriarchal society always undermines women's experiences and sufferings as domestic and insignificant while the men's experiences as universal. This is the primary reason why female Jews' holocaust traumatic experiences, pains and sufferings remained unclaimed in the mainstream representation of holocaust history.

Pointing out the role of the discourse of patriarchal influence in the documentation of holocaust history, gender trauma critic, Louise O. Vasvari identifies, "Holocaust scholarship still tends to privilege the Holocaust experience of men as universal and is reluctant to acknowledge testimony that does not follow preconceived gender stereotypes and suitable female behavior or pre-existing narratives of survival" (2). Here, Louise clearly observes the influence of the conventional gender perspective in ignoring women's holocaust experiences and their struggle for surviving the holocaust trauma. Vasvari's observation on the female

holocaust victims' struggle for survival as different from that of men can be realized in Gerda's narrative description:

Sunday was our day of leisure. We usually sat around and talked, slept, or invented games to play. A favorite game was called "Adventure." Each girl said where she would like to travel and why. The walls of the camp seemed to slide away as each of us wandered over the wide world. The war seemed far away and a life of adventure unfolded. One Sunday in late fall we played a variation of the game. The question was posed: "if you could choose, what qualities would you have in a husband?" Ilse nudged me constantly as some of the answers were given, and Suse could hardly suppress her laughter, some wanted wealth, and swore if given a chance they would be stricken from the vocabulary. To many, the most important attributes were good looks, combined with gaiety and the ability to dance. (156).

These narrative lines evidently expose the nature of survival on the part of female. While male's focus was on escaping the walls of the camp through the physical force, the Jews victims, compelled by gender, rather work through the traumatic atmosphere of the holocaust camp and the state of helplessness through the formation of sisterhood and discussion of the family matters, games and the future matters such as the quality of their future partner. These manners of struggling the holocaust trauma were never found in the mainstream narrative of the male's writings. Thus, Jews women's holocaust experiences in terms of their victimization through the sexual objectification and their struggle for survival through the form of sisterhood, family matters, recipe, and future plans offer an alternative picture to the wholeness of the representation of the holocaust history. Gerda's memoir documents the experience of holocaust tragedy from the perspective of the double victimization of the Jews

women which are as equally significant as that of the mainstream observation of the absolute experiences of the Jews male. Identifying the women as one of those targeted groups subjected to the traumatising due to the domestic violence and oppression, the gender trauma critic, Kali Tal observes:

Within a society, there may be several targeted groups, whose members are subject of traumatising in greater or lesser degrees. Targeted groups can and should be examined both in relation to the dominant group and to each other. In the United States, Jews are only one of several targeted groups. Though discriminated against, Jews do not suffer from violent racism or systematic economic oppression. Other targeted groups-women and racial minorities, for example-are at higher risk of traumatic assault. (9)

Like these lines illustrate, the subjects of traumatising are often the minor and marginal targeted groups because of the hierarchical power distribution. Tal here clearly claims that women are the most targeted and subjugated group to the violence and traumatic assault. Making United Nations a case study, she compares the psychological traumatic impact of the women with other minor groups like Jews and argue that women are at higher risk of traumatising. Likewise, she suggests for the analysis of the traumatising of targeted groups from their dominant groups in power. Following this lines, Gerda's narrative reflects the dominant powers of Nazism and women's experience of double victimization both as a Jews and women.

However, Tal further adds that women have their own instinct to defend and resist themselves from the traumatising inflicted upon them by the dominant powers. Referring typical resistance of women who are the most targeted groups of traumatic assaults in the society, she observes:

Those few women who testify about atrocities have a strong sense of

community, chiefly with other women who they see as potentially powerful enough to have an effect on the social, political and economic structures that supports sexual abuse...The most important factor in women's decision to testify to atrocity is the feeling of sisterhood, connection to other women, and the hope that the community of women will be strong enough to prevent the commission of atrocity in the future. (127)

Like aforementioned gender trauma critics observed, Tal also holds the same opinion that women bear different nature of witness and victimhood when they have to go through the scenes of traumatic incidents, offence and violence, be it the trauma resulted from the domestic violence such as the betrayal or the massive traumatic assault such as the trauma inflicted by the Nazi brutality. Tal's observation can be further elucidated by the help of Gerda's narrative explanation. Gerda focuses on the sisterhood as the bonding source of courage to tackle with the burning traumatic torture by the SS soldiers during their hostage in the camps. She developed sisterhood with Ilse and Suse and all of them stayed together trying hard to defend each other in the times of brutal punishment from the soldiers.

Like Tal said, these Jews women were in the helpless and powerless conditions because of the dominance of Hitler's autocratic rulership. They could do nothing to stop the traumatic, violent and inhuman behaviors of the Nazis soldiers. Such helplessness, hopelessness conditions of the Jews women during the camp but still their constant sisterhood as the support system to resist against the Nazis' traumatic violence is evidently manifested in the following scene in which Gerda struggles to save Ilse's life when the Nazi officer physically beats her. While being on the way in the course of being transported from one camp to another camp, the officer applies cruel physical force against Ilse:

“Lie down!” yelled the SS.

“Water,” Ilse whispered.

I started for the brook nearby. An SS man shouted at me to stop.

“Water for my sister,” I begged.

“Get back , you swine!” He kicked at me with heavy boots. As he followed me to where Ilse was lying, he stopped to slap a couple of girls who got up from the wet ground. When Ilse heard his heavy steps approach, she said feverishly:

“Hear! they are coming! Our saviors!”

“What do you want, you bitch?” demanded the SS guard.

“water,” Ilse whispered.

He kicked her.

“Why?” Ilse cried faintly. “Why?”

“God, have you no mercy?” I sobbed. I flung myself across her body. (204)

This heart-wrenching scene about the physical brutality imposed upon women during the Nazi atrocity and the action of women for the resistance against Nazi’s violent activity exclusively depicts the power of sisterhood demonstrated by the women victims of the concentration camps. The scene shows Gerda risking her own life and struggling to save Ilse, whom she just met in the camp during the hostage, from the deadly attack and inhuman treatment of the S-S soldiers. She defies the fears and terrors from the soldiers and brings water from the nearby brook when Ilse faintly asks for a drop of water talking last breathes of her life.

This heart-breaking tragic scene showing the deep-rooted motherhood and sisterhood as the means and weapons of Jews women to battle against the Nazism during the dark period of camp reflects a completely different side of holocaust history since it is feminine course of resistance against Nazism for their lives in

comparison to that male's resistance. The women's sisterhood and motherhood as weapon to endure and fight the extreme traumatic situations in the camp can further be realized in the following narrative lines in which Gerda mentions her closeness with one of her inmates and the way they share the affection and care in the times of adversity, starvation and deadening harassment:

Then I went to look for Hanka. I had met her in Grunberg while working on the night shift, and from the start, we had taken to each other. Occasionally she was called to help in the kitchen and when she did, she always managed to scrounge extra bits of food for Ilse and me. Thus, Hanka had become an angel to me whose kindness I shall never forget. During the march, Hanka had remained relatively healthy and strong, and because of this, the SS commandant had ordered her to help with ill. Now I ran to find her, foolishly hoping that she might have a magic solution for Ilse. (201)

In these narrative lines, the triangular relation of sisterhood in the times of traumatic life in the camp between Ilse, Hanka and Gerda is clearly realized. While Ilse is falling sick and is facing deadly health problems resulted from the starvation and torture in the camp, Gerda is concerned about her life and takes help of Hanka. Hanka has always been helpful for her. She met her in the previous camp but their bonding offers them a sense of security and shelter to fight against all the tortures, extremes, harassments and difficulties they must confront any time. This textual evidence is just a representative example to illustrate the sisterhood and motherhood among the Jews women during the camp which they use as an instrument for the resistance against all the sufferings and pains during the hostage.

This way, the holocaust history from the perspective of Jews women offers different historical picture than the one represented by the mainstream representation.

The mainstream discussions and representations of the holocaust atrocity is highly dominated and covered by the male's writings. After the liberation from the holocaust nightmare, many survivors started giving a narrative to their holocaust experiences during their stay in the camp. Most of these witness narratives were that of male. Their narratives and writings largely dealt with the outdoor activities, physical tortures and other different forms of punishment and harassment that was inflicted upon them just because they were male by gender. Their narratives cover the atrocious scenes such as gasification, physical works, starvation, physical harassment and their struggles to escape away at times. However, these writings rarely address the heinous sufferings that the Jews women had to undergo during the dark period of holocaust. It involves two reasons: the patriarchal atmosphere of the then society that hardly values the holocaust experiences of the women as the representative and the different nature of holocaust tragedy that women suffered which the male never went through and couldn't represent in their writings.

The long-held gender perspective of the patriarchal society downplayed the public experiences of the women as insignificant experiences. There were some Jews women who wrote diaries, letters and other autobiographical writings dealing with their sufferings of extreme traumatic experiences in the concentration camps. Yet, their voices received no attention in the publications. Due to the discourse of patriarchy that undermined the women's experiences, feelings, voices as domestic and insignificant ones. But only the male's experiences were considered to hold public significance. The male Jews holocaust experiences were treated and perceived as the universal experience of the holocaust whereas Jews women holocaust experiences remained unnoticed owing to the unequal power distribution of the society. Like Foucault asserts, the discourse constructed by the society overshadowed the voice of

those in margin. The history is created by those in authority. Since patriarchal society gave more privilege to men, women's writings found no space in the holocaust literature.

On the other hand, men survivors failed to highlight the holocaust traumatic experiences of the Jews women because of difference in the nature of their traumatic situations. Men's holocaust sufferings were different from that of what women suffered except for few instances of Nazis' course of punishment for both male and female such as gasification when they would become sick and physically weak to carry camp works. Men were forced to carry out physical works, mostly outdoor works whereas the women were assigned forcefully to do light indoor works such as kitting, weaving, cooking and sewing. They were forced to produce military garments for the Nazis soldier. Unlike men ever experienced, Jews women were sexually harassed. They were made naked for the pleasure of sick and wounded SS soldiers. The SS soldiers would ask for sexual act in exchange of food. Most of the women were sterilized to make them work more hours in the camp. Similarly, they had to spend many days hungry. Due to poor nutrition, they suffered irregular and infected menstruations. During the indoor work, they would contract diseases like tuberculosis. Those sick women were taken to gas chamber for gasification. Despite such horrible and traumatic conditions, they formed sisterhood and motherhood and would take about their past, family and recipe in order to tolerate the traumatic pains. These tortures and traumas were absolutely feminine in nature compared to that of men which remained unnoticed in the men's holocaust narratives. Thus, women's narratives of holocaust trauma such as Gerda's *All But Mt Life* offer an alternative picture to complete the wholeness of holocaust history.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis, entitled “An Alternative History of Holocaust: New Historical Reading in Gerda W. Klein's *All But My Life*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Sanatan Lamichhane has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Members of the Research Committee

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Head

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Date: _____

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