

THE SCARS OF THE GREAT WAR IN WILLIAM STYRON'S *SOPHIE'S CHOICE*

Dr. Rakesh Kumar Sharma

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Bhaderwah Campus
University of Jammu,
(J & k)

Abstract

William Styron published his fifth and last novel, *Sophie's Choice* in 1979 which deals, generally, with the Nazism and the World War and particularly, with the total domination of one race of people upon the other race of people, the total domination of human beings upon human beings. In France, *Sophie's Choice* is considered one of the most significant novels to have emerged since World War II. The World War I was followed by World War II. *Sophie's Choice* was made into a film with the same title starring Meryl Streep as Sophie and Kevin Kline as Nathan in which the experience of mass extermination centers of World War II has been well communicated. In his last novel, Styron very successfully relates the two horrors of modern times—slavery and genocide in the American South and slavery and genocide in Nazi Eastern Europe. He very successfully demonstrates that Auschwitz was a part of a long history of global slavery which believed that life is totally expendable and thus justified mass extermination. He seems drawing a daring parallel between the antebellum South of America and Nazism of Europe. The paper unravels the deep scars of the Nazism on the psychology of its protagonist Sophie and makes the endeavour to study just like the result of World War I, how this impact of Nazism leaves its victims beyond the hope of recuperation.

William Styron published his fifth and last novel, *Sophie's Choice* in 1979 which has been successful in portraying the demonic Nazi atrocities and its impact on its characters. *Sophie's Choice* was an instant hit and as a result was on the hardcover best seller list for forty seven weeks and it fetched Styron American Book Award for Fiction in 1980. There have been over twenty foreign language editions of this novel. In 1984, Styron was awarded the medal of the Commandant of the Legion of Honor for this work, the highest honour the French Government bestows. In France, *Sophie's Choice* is considered one of the most significant novels to have emerged since World War II. *Sophie's Choice* was made into a film with the same title starring Meryl Streep as Sophie and Kevin Kline as Nathan. Through this novel, Styron very successfully tries to explore the absolute form of evil. He also uses a line in the novel from Andre Malraux's *Lazare* as one of the epigraphs to it: "I seek that essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood". Styron's absolute evil as he dramatizes in the novel

is the terrible reality of our world which we encountered in the Nazi concentration camps in which the dominating race of people (Nazis) separated families and friends of the dominated race of people (Jews particularly) into those sent off to die and those sent off to labour till they die as a means of inhuman domination. Styron in this novel, has been successful in very beautifully highlighting the demonic form of Nazi fanaticism, slavery and genocide. Styron does not blame abstract systems like genocide of Nazi Germany, for absolute evil, but on the other hand he blames ourselves because he thinks it is we who are responsible for creating divisive inhuman and destructive systems which serve to separate us from one another. When Styron visited Auschwitz before writing *Sophie's Choice*, for the real experience of the real torture as a loyal novelist to his calling, encountering the absolute evil of the place he did not ask where God was during the genocide but asked where man was during these inhuman atrocities.

Styron, through this novel tries to make the reader familiar with the mechanism that how Hitler's Nazism, Holocaust and its effect is universal and how the tragedy continues to manifest itself more than two generations after the human calamity, causing great anguish in particular to its survivors and non survivors, to their children and grandchildren, to Jews and Gentiles, to Europeans, Americans and Asians and in general everyone. For him, the inhuman mechanical execution of the Jews and other victims of Nazi concentration camps was not inhumanity against only the Jews, but the whole human race.

Sophie's Choice also throws a flood of light on the moral and religious impact of the Nazism not only on Sophie Zawistowska, the beautiful protagonist of the novel who is a Polish Catholic survivor of Auschwitz, but also on several other minor characters as well as on the novel's narrator, Stingo who is alter ego of William Styron himself in the novel. Stingo narrates in the novel, his meeting with Sophie, a Polish Catholic and survivor of the concentration camp and her lover Nathan Landau, a Jew and tells how he ultimately becomes Sophie's friend, confident and confessor. Stingo explores his role as a narrator to approach the irresolute issue of existence.

The plot of the novel unravels the relationship between Sophie and Nathan, and when this relationship between both of them deteriorates during the summer and fall of 1947, Stingo grows progressively intimate with Sophie, the two finally make intense love in a hotel room in Washington before Sophie as eternal victim of Nazi concentration camp and tortured by her sense of guilt returns to Nathan who is a drug addict, paranoid schizophrenic and embraces her death by committing suicide with the latter. Styron through his character of Sophie in the novel seems to prove that the survivors of the Holocaust can never totally become normal again and recover thoroughly. They can possibly survive physically for some time but can never survive emotionally or spiritually after going through the hell of Holocaust. In this novel, the reader interprets the novel's title dealing with the protagonist's choices, and analyses the causes and consequences of her decision to abandon Stingo, who offers her hope, love and happiness in favour of Nathan and the torture, punishment and self destructive impulses that Nathan represents.

In order to make the reader understand Sophie's decision, Styron, through his skillful use of the flash back technique, reveals the facts about her past choices which are the source of her consuming guilt. Styron tells brilliantly as a novelist that the choices which weigh so heavily on Sophie's soul, some of these choices she has freely embraced whereas other choices have been forced upon her. Past and present have been complexly interwoven by Styron in the structure of the novel and the reader examines the impact of Sophie's past European experience on her present life in America. The past of the novel, which is revealed through the flash backs in the

conversation between Sophie and Stingo deals with Sophie's childhood in prewar Cracow, Warsaw Ghetto during the Second World War. But she is mainly haunted by her experience at Auschwitz, smoked with the nearby crematoria at Birkenau.

The novel begins in Brooklyn of 1947 with narrator's perceptions of Sophie. Through Sophie's conversation with Stingo we come across the past of Sophie in Poland in chapter 4 of the novel, and find her in Auschwitz in chapter 9. Between the events of time present and Sophie's European past are details of her first year in America, that how she accidentally met Nathan in a Brooklyn college library where like an angel he saved her from the browbeating by a bureaucrat there and her relationship with him commenced when he loaded her with the iron to fight her anemia and helped her bloom like a rose once again in her life. Styron develops Nathan as a self-proclaimed scientist, a Harvard graduate, a biologist in search of the cure for humankind's most dreadful diseases. When he first meets Sophie, she mistakes him for a physician and gets astray by his knowledge of illnesses and their cures. He is skillfully portrayed by the novelist as a complex personality who has moods of intense calm in which he sits quietly with Sophie, reciting Emily Dickenson or listening to Beethoven's Fourth Symphony whereas he has upsurges too of joy during which he tells screamingly funny jokes and cannot sit still. But there is also the dark side of Nathan's character, fueled by the fury and passion, rage and disorder. During his rage he toasts the death instead of life. He analogizes Nazism to cancer and is obsessed with it. His obsession with the Holocaust is one of the reasons for his attraction to Sophie, who has firsthand knowledge of it, but, this fact of Sophie is also the reason that causes him to detest her for being of Polish, non-Jewish origins, and to berate her for living when others have perished due to the eternal, inhuman tortures of the camp. Nathan himself feels guilty for being a Jew of military age and for having not fought, not died, for his people who suffered the demonic tortures just because they were Jews. Nathan's brother eventually discloses to Stingo the horrible key to Nathan's alternating moods as Nathan is not only a drug addict but he is also a certified paranoid schizophrenic. His personal history is fraud, for he has never been to college, much less to Harvard, as he claimed. His life's work is a pretense, for he is not a biologist on the verge of a scientific breakthrough at all.

When Stingo meets Sophie in the novel, he does not take her as a product of historical phenomenon. He even does not understand the Nazi tattoo engraved on her arm when he observes it. His progressive intimacy with Sophie reveals both his personal attachment for her and the process of comprehending the demonic forces of Nazism. He tells about this purpose:

[T]he embodiment of evil which Auschwitz has become remains impenetrable only so long as we shrink from trying to penetrate it . . . I have thought it might be opposite to make a stab at understanding Auschwitz by trying to understand Sophie. . . . (264)

This statement by Stingo hints at his attempt to explore and understand the nature of evil represented by Hitler. His involvement with Sophie becomes complex when she regards him as a confidant and tells about her early life at Cracow. Early in the novel she paints an ideal, peaceful, domestic picture of her early life before becoming a victim of the Holocaust. She tells many lies to Stingo about her father and husband whom she portrays before him as liberal, socialist and pacifist intellectuals. She misrepresents her father as a person who was a good Pole and concocts an event that how he once risked his life "hiding three Jewish families from the program, from the Cossack soldiers" (96). She also tells lie about her husband, named Casmir Kazik whom she loved "deeply" and who was "generous, loving and so intelligent" (97). Sophie tells Stingo that

her father and husband were killed by the Germans only because they were Polish and professors.

Later in the novel, when Stingo happens to learn from Dr. Blackstock that Sophie is a daughter of a famous professor Bieganski of the University of Cracow who had given “Final Solution” to the Jewish problem as the total extermination of them in Europe and supported Germans in their massacre against the Jews. Stingo reveals to Sophie that he knows the truth about her early life, her father and husband. When Sophie realizes that her lies have been exposed she reverses the idealized picture of her family. Then she confesses to Stingo the reality of her father that he was actually a strong anti-Semitic. He was a strong anti-Semitic professor who wrote pamphlets “filled with love of Germany” and with “very bitter hatred of Jews, saying they contaminate the culture of Europe and such as that” (296). Stingo does not create a mess over Sophie’s former lies to him about her European past but on the other hand just like a true explorer takes a cool, objective look at her fabrications. He is able to understand Sophie and her evasions and fabrications as he finds them necessary for retaining her composure, calmness and sanity. He very emotionally reflects:

As will be seen in due course, Sophie told me a number of lies that summer. Perhaps I should say she indulged in certain evasions which at the time were necessary in order for her to retain her composure. Or may be her sanity. (115)

With the passage of time, Sophie trusts Stingo and unburdens her heart by revealing her guilts to him. She becomes more intimate with him that in her melodramatic soliloquy she desperately wails and reveals the heavy burden of Nazi experience; “Oh, goddamn, Stingo, I’m so awful unhappy! . . . Where’s Nathan?” “Where’s Jozef? Where’s *everybody*?” Oh, Stingo, I want to die!” (442) (emphasis original). Stingo, having true sympathy for her tries to console her. By Stingo’s touch of sympathy and his human treatment, Sophie gets her emotions flooded out to him: “Hold me, Stingo, “she whispered despairingly, “hold me. I feel so lost. Oh Christ, I feel so lost! What am I going to do? What am I going to do? I’m so alone!” (442).

Sophie has been portrayed by Styron as a onetime devout Catholic whose faith gets shattered due to her Nazi experience, but she nevertheless remains entangled with the problems of religious belief. Through her first extended discussion with Stingo, the reader comes to know about an important incident of her life related to her failed attempt to commit suicide in the church itself as a deliberate attempt of sacrilegious act on her part. She recalls her conversation that she had with a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz in a Swedish camp for displaced persons immediately after the Second World War. The Jewish woman, who is herself a devoutly religious, asks Sophie whether she does not believe the Christian God. Sophie’s answer to the Jewish woman shows her belief in the apparent absence of God from a universe in which the Holocaust could occur. Sophie tells Stingo that to the Jewish woman:

I said that I knew that Christ had turned His face away from me and I could no longer pray to Him as I did once in Cracow I couldn’t any longer pray to Him or could I anymore cry. And when she asked how I know that Christ have turned His face away from me, I said I just knew, I just knew that only a God, only a Jesus who had no pity and who no longer care for me could permit the people I loved to be killed and let me live with such guilt. (101-02)

Through her confessions in the form of flashbacks to him, Stingo finds that Sophie has been involved with both the sins of omission and commission. When she was in Warsaw, for

instance, she refused to aid Polish Resistance in the Ghetto by helping her lover Josef and his half-sister Wanda, by translating certain documents, owing to the fact that she is the only one among them who can command the German language. This choice of Sophie in not helping the Polish Resistance makes Wanda to charge her with “an act of moral cowardice” (451) to this charge of Wanda, Sophie retorts that she does not want to endanger the life of her children and she firmly tells Wanda that she has made her mind not to get involved. Wanda knows that no one is safe and Third Reich is enemy of every one, not only Jews but also Poles, Slavs, Gypsies, homosexuals and the mentally and physically handicapped. Wanda, who is also a non Jew like Sophie forces the latter to look at pictures of the bodies of all the innocent children gassed, and makes her realize that the concentration camps were not just labour camps but also extermination camps. The biggest irony of the Nazi evil, that Stingo comes to learn through Sophie’s flashback is that even the daughter and two grand children of one of the masterminds of the Final Solution, Sophie’s father, Prof. Bieganski, experience firsthand the demonic hell of the gas chambers and concentration camps designed especially for the Jews only. Sophie’s father himself gets executed by the very people whose doctrine he held dear.

The most torturing fact of Sophie’s life which forms her real base of her guilt is her ironic choice which she is forced to make upon her arrival at the concentration camp in 1943 for the failed attempt to smuggle meat for her tubercular mother, which Styron makes her reveal to Stingo just before her suicide with Nathan at Brooklyn, near the climax of the novel. We come to know about this fact in the second half of the novel, through Sophie's flashbacks in her conversation with Stingo, that she had not come alone to the concentration camp instead she had come to Auschwitz with her son Jan and her daughter, Eva. In her flashback Sophie tells Stingo how outside the camp, on the railroad platform, a sadist Nazi doctor was sorting out those to be gassed immediately from those who he selects for the slave labour.

At this point of her encounter with Auschwitz, Sophie tries to impress the sadist doctor by telling him in German, that she is not a Jew and she believes in Christ, to this stone hearted doctor orders to choose which of her children would live, Jan or Eva, owing to the fact that she is a Polish Catholic and not a Jew and so deserves special privilege to make a choice. When the doctor warns Sophie to make a choice or he will gas her both children, half maddened Sophie selects Jan to live as a result of her ironic and forced choice, Eva her little daughter goes to death. This is the deadly choice that gives her the fatal sense of guilt and that Sophie conceals longest from Stingo.

The doctor tells Sophie, “You’re a Pollack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege—a choice” (594).

Sophie is portrayed very skillfully by Styron as turned hostile to Christianity. One day when in a restaurant she along with Stingo encounters two nuns she states:

Oh, how I hate that stupid religion! . . . ‘Please, Stingo, those nuns make me feel so *pourri*—rotten. Stinking . . . groveling in front of a God who must be a *monster*, Stingo, if He exist. A monster!’ . . . I don’t want to talk about religion. I hate religion. It is for, you know, *des analphabetes*, imbecile peoples.’ (238) (emphasis original)

In order to dissociate herself completely from religion, she longs to commit some great sin, some great blasphemous act. This is the reason, the longing, that she commits unsuccessful suicide in Sweden, in a chapel near the camp for displaced persons. She tells Stingo:

I had this idea that if I killed myself in this church, it would be the greatest sacrifice I could ever commit, because you see, Stingo, I didn’t care no

more; after Auschwitz, I didn't believe in God or if He existed. I would say to myself: He has turned His back on me. And if He has turned His back on me, then I hate Him so that to show and prove my hatred I would commit the greatest sacrilege I could think of. Which is, I would commit my suicide in His church, on sacred ground. (501)

In America after the war, Sophie remained oppressed by her awareness of having lost God. Unable to find God and having watched Him turning His back on her, she gets determined not to lose Nathan at any cost. She tells Stingo, "I was still ready for Nathan to piss on me, rape me, stab me, beat me, blind me, do anything with me that he desired" (422) just to make sure his companionship. She joins Nathan in bed, and she tells Stingo that they made love all afternoon in Connecticut. Sex and wine become Sophie's solution in dealing with the problem of God and her guilt. She confesses to Stingo that due to love all afternoon with Nathan, "made me forget the pain but forget God too, and Jan, and all the other things I had lost" (422). Nathan, as she tells Stingo, becomes her "Savior" (162), "a redemptive knight" (380) a sort of redemption from her guilt which is momentary not permanent.

Through the detailed analyses of the novel the point gets established that the impact of Nazism is consuming, fatal and malignant physically, spiritually and emotionally, but, Styron has also given a solution so that the kind of evil of World Wars may be avoided. The solution to this absolute evil of mankind is given by Stingo through the line in his journal which declares: "*Let your love flow out on all living things*" (629) (emphasis original). Styron makes Stingo acknowledge that the command to love all living things is not a creation by himself but:

It springs from the universe and is the property of God, the words have been intercepted—on the wing, so to speak—by such mediators as Lao-tzo, Jesus, Gautama Buddha and thousands of lesser prophets, including your narrator, who heard the terrible truth of their drumming somewhere between Baltimore and Wilmington and set them down with the fury of a madman sculpting in stone (630).

Stingo's solution and infact Styron's solution for the guilt of mankind's violence against mankind itself is provided by the moral demands of love of the Eastern and Western religious traditions. It is to combat this guilt of the Nazism and World War II that Stingo's/Styron's precept urges love for all living things.

Works Cited

- Brandeau, Michael. "Why I Wrote *Sophie's Choice*." *London Express* (Feb. 1981): 243-55. Print.
- Kreyling, Michael. "Speakable and Unspeakable in Styron's *Sophie's Choice*." *Southern Review* 20 (1984): 546-61. Print.
- Lang, John. "Gods Averted Face: Styron's *Sophie's Choice*." *American Literature* 55 (May 1983): 215-32. Print.
- Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice*. London: Vintage, 2005. Print.
- West, James L.W., III. ed. *Conversation With William Styron*. Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1985. Print.