



Holocaust Identity as a Continuum: A Study of Helen Epstein's Memoir, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*

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Abstract

As a descendant of Holocaust survivors, Helen Epstein was troubled by the inherited Holocaust memories perpetuating anguish since her childhood and she encountered her personal identity being ruptured due to migration and voluntary repression of the past accounts. The suspended communication and the lack of societal engagement enhancing the Jewish essence resulted in subdued and diminished Jewish identity. In the quest of reconfiguring her personal identity, Helen Epstein travelled to Israel and assimilated into the social and cultural domain of the nation which normalized her Jewish identity, differing from the marginal status in the United States. The assimilation into the Jewish sphere enhanced her identity structure, constituting the flux of her personal identity.

Keywords: Holocaust trauma, Ruptured personal identity, Quest of identity, Assimilation.

The human identity is an integral element that is forever constituted based on the temporal events of one's life experiences. When an individual encounters a catastrophic event as that of Holocaust, this event reorders and reconstitutes the identity of a human being radically. The identity of a victim or a survivor

is authored and mediated through Holocaust horrors. This paper seeks to explore the Holocaust identity as a second-generation continuum, as the Holocaust identity has been passed on to the second-generation victims. As a second-generation victim, Helen Epstein authored her personal identity mediated

through her parents' traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, the Holocaust identity can be seen as a continuum passed through snippets of memory, deep silences, mixed languages and metaphoric iron box containing the dangerous memory accounts of her parents' sufferings during the Nazi execution. She experienced frequent hauntings triggered by the latent mental presence of the Holocaust horrors. She inherited the Holocaust trauma as a vicarious participant which affected her personal identity. The collective Jewish identification in the aftermath of the Holocaust catastrophe is constructed with terrorizing accounts of Nazi atrocities encompassing the horrendous afflictions, excruciating pain, and unprecedented mass annihilation. The temporal transference of the Holocaust horrors affected the identification structure of the generational victims, triggered by the continued trauma and anguish. Marianne Hirsch describes the integration of Holocaust memories into the realm of collective Jewish identity as,

descendants of victim survivors as well as of perpetrators and of bystanders who witnessed massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they identify that connection as a form of memory, and that in, certain extreme circumstances, memory can be transferred to those who were not actually there to live an event (Hirsch 3)

The concretized identification is a rudiment acting as a dynamic foundation governing the trajectory of the individuals' lives. The personal identity of an individual encompasses the innate physiological, emotional and psychological traits. In the social perspective, the term identity signifies the similarity owned by the group of individuals and the notion of identity is grounded on the interrelationship shared between the individual's adherence to a particular group as the whole and the sphere of specified group is structured by the mutual coordination exhibited

by the individuals as units forming the whole. The *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* describes the personal identity as something "refers to the unique characteristics of a person, including personality traits, personal values, opinions and preferences, physical characteristics and career and lifestyle choices. In other words, these refer to aspects of a person's identity that are distinct from other people." The social identity is explained as, "one's social roles such as gender, racial, religious, political, ideological and national group memberships... sharing a physical characteristic, speaking a common language, having a similar social class or socio economic status, practicing the same religion or living in a common region (Brinthaup 552)"

Erikson explains the personal identity as, "the conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one's existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity (Erikson 50)." The synchronization of personal identity in a particular social group is directed by similarity and acknowledgement as the individuals exhibit concurrence to the values and elements of the group and subsequently recognized and legitimized by the community. The individual's continuity with the temporal flow is validated by the constitutive elements and conventional patterns of a specified group. The intrinsic elements of the social group include the language, festivals, rites, rituals, cuisines, legislation, values, practices, style and fashion, etc., The solidarity to the group is operated through interaction which enabled the individuals to acquire and reciprocate the norms and values of the group by engaging in active communication. The disengagement to core of the specified community culminates in fragmented identity and the suspended association subdued the incorporation of the intrinsic elements like "ancient language, religion, kinship system or way of life" (Eriksen

81). The disjuncture between the individuals and the domain of the community is caused by varied factors including "migration, change in the demographic situation, industrialization, or other economic change, or integration into or encapsulation by a larger political system" (Eriksen 81). The individual detached from the core of a social group, relocated in a different territory confronts the inherent identification being diminished due to the suspension of active interaction to the elements of the native community and the relocated individual encounters the predicament of impaired identity resultant of inefficient assimilation into the migrated land.

The Holocaust, a catastrophic event, doomed the entire Jewish community during the course of the horrifying annihilation and in the aftermath due to its terrifying magnitude. The Holocaust as a terrifying event, incorporated into the Jewish identification realm as the catastrophic event perpetuated trauma across generations. The survivors of Holocaust horrors scattered across the globe and relocated their livelihood in the respective migrated countries. The dispersal of the survivors severed their bonding to their past and thereby ruptured their identification structure in the relocated nations. The Jewish community was collectively traumatized by the Holocaust horrors and the catastrophic event modified the sphere of collective Jewish identity as Jeffrey C. Alexander described the cultural trauma as,

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander 1)

The Holocaust horrors incorporated into the realm of collective Jewish identity perpetuated the trauma to the descendants of

the survivors and victims. Two differing attitudes were exhibited by the Holocaust victims and their descendants as the survivors intended to elude and escape the sphere of excruciating terrors whereas their descendants inclined to integrate into the essence of Jewishness so as to restore and concretize their fragmented identity. In the post Holocaust times, the rupture of the Jewish identity was caused by varied factors including the psychological suppression of the Jewish horrors to shield against the catastrophic trauma, the survivors' conscious concealing of the Jewish identity to prevent antisemitic hatred, the survivors' assimilation into the societal structures of the migrated countries, etc., Encountering the identity troubles, the generational victims exhibited fervent inclination to retrace and restore their Jewish roots. The conception of travel was perceived as an efficient approach since visiting the places signifying the Jewish performance including the native places in European countries and the Promised Land of Israel would enable them to reconstruct their fragmented Jewish identity.

This article explores Helen Epstein configuring her Jewish identity mediated through the Holocaust identity of her parents and her journey to the land of Israel. Her memoir, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of the Holocaust Survivors* (1979), records the memory accounts of her visit to Israel comprising the pursuit of restoring and reconstructing her Jewish identity, affirmed by the assimilation into the Jewish land. In the aftermath of the Holocaust horrors, her parents migrated to United States, settled in New York. Since her childhood, she was haunted by the intermittent surfacing of the Holocaust images. Though she did not encounter the Nazi terrors personally, she was troubled by the inherited memories of the Jewish sufferings. She experienced abnormal fear and delusions, excessive vigilance against unknown enemies, pessimistic attitude of anticipating negative outcomes. She was troubled by the fractured

and uncommunicated memory accounts of the past resulting in ruptured personal identity. Traumatized by the Holocaust horrors, she was triggered to revitalize her affiliation to the Jewish essence and she travelled to Israel to comply her psychic demand of effective merging and assimilation into the Jewish domain.

The individual's social engagement is framed and operated by the norms and values of the specific social group through intrinsic units including language, rituals, rites, values, festivals, traditions, etc., Jan Assman mentioned the aspects of the social identity as, "they arise from a consciousness that is formed and determined by the language, ideas, norms, and values of a particular time and culture (Assman 113)." The migrated Jewish individuals were deprived of societal framework enhancing their Jewish core and lacking in effective Jewish communal engagement. Helen Epstein recorded that the Jewish communities established in the migrated lands were incapable of configuring definite structure to the Jewish identity. The commitment towards the cultural and social engagement of the migrated land and lack of genuine affection to the Jewish essence diminished the core of Jewishness in foreign nations.

The Holocaust had become the touchstone of their identities as Jews and it became a touchstone for their children as well. The trouble was that while it conferred an identity, it proved no structure, no clue to a way of life. (Epstein 260)

The intense inclination to merge into the Jewish society insisted her to travel to Israel from the New York City where she could not construct tangible Jewish identity. Against her parents' refusal, she landed on the nation of the Israel on 1967 and she stayed in the land for three years which facilitated her to shape her personal identity. An individual renders integral solidarity to a specific group and

exhibits active engagement with intricate elements structuring and governing the core of the community since the course of the individual's life is compounded on the norms of the particular community. The community acts as complex network, a shared entity, displaying the interrelated bonding formed among the individuals through their mutual cooperation to the core. Jan Assman described the operation of the identity as, "a self grows from outside in. It builds up individually by participating in the interactive and communicative patterns of the group to which it belongs and that group's self-image" (Epstein 112). The Jewish individuals, assimilated into the societal structure of the migrated land, confronted disjuncture to the realm of the Jewish identity. The migrated land operating in its own axis, could not generate the domain characterized by Jewish essence which Helen Epstein mentioned that the atmosphere of the United States could not nurture her inherent Jewish identity. The lack of definite and concretized Jewish group in the migrated land diminished active cooperation, contribution and assimilation to the Jewish realm. She conceived the travel to the land of Israel would enhance her affinity to the Jewish core and thereby her Jewish identity would be restored and revitalized. Helen Epstein perceived the land of Israel as,

one of the very few places which offered an option, a possibility of living in a community where there were people like myself, where the experience of death and displacement was the rule rather than the exception. (Epstein 261)

Helen Epstein regarded that the quest for identifying and nurturing her Jewish essence would be reinforced by the Jewish community of Israel as any individual would thrive in a specified group comprising individuals sharing similar values. The active assimilation into a specified community operates on acquiring the language of the particular group, experiencing the geographical conditions, and embracing the

cultural and social elements of the target group including food, rituals, legislation, and communal kinship. The process of experiencing the intrinsic elements of the particular society permits a person to merge into the realm of the specified group. Jan Assman signified this experiencing the social elements as, "if contact with others is to lead to the formation of identity, the person concerned must live with them in a shared world of symbolic meaning" (Assman116). Helen Epstein's travel aimed on the principal interest of reconstructing her Jewish identity, which could be achieved through intensified assimilation into the land of Israel. On her quest, Helen Epstein inclined to acquire Hebrew, the Jewish language and experience the food, climate and other societal structures of the Jewish society. She mentioned her interests as,

I set off for Israel with few possessions, determined to learn a new language, Hebrew, as my parents had learned English; to learn to live in a new country with a new climate, new set of laws, new foods, new kind of people. I arrived in Israel ready to join the army, if need be, ready to renounce my American citizenship and start from scratch. (Epstein 261)

Language is a significant unit, collectively owned by a communal group, which operates the interaction and communication in the particular societal framework. Jan Assman mentions the significance of the language as, "language is the most common means of constructing and fuelling social reality" (Assman 122). The language is a binding entity ensuring active engagement and mutual coordination in a specified social group which Mikhail Bakhtin describes it as, "verbal discourse is a social phenomenon - social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (Bakhtin 259). On her arrival to Israel, Helen Epstein actively engaged in

acquiring Hebrew which she recorded as she spent six hours every day for learning the language. She attempted to read, write and speak Hebrew, which would act as the binding factor, enabling her to integrate into the core of the Jewish society.

In August of 1967, I and hundreds of other foreign students were working six hours a day, six days a week, trying to gain fluency in Hebrew to understand the lectures that would begin two months later. From eight in the morning until every afternoon, we read, wrote and spoke Hebrew. We read excerpts from the Bible, from the newspapers.... The syllables I had found so ugly when they were chanted in synagogue in New York now seemed to me the most musical of sounds. (Epstein 264)

The assimilation into a specified societal group is achieved by inheriting the norms and cultural structures of the particular group. The society is a domain operated through the shared affinity owned by the members of the group and Jan Assman describes the entities of a specified community as, "rites and dances, patterns and decorations, costumes, tattoos, food and drink, monuments, pictures, landscapes, and so on" (Assman 120). Helen Epstein attempted to assimilate into the Jewish society through varied approaches including imitating the Israeli attitudes and style, adapting the manners and expressions of the locality and, acquiring the Jewish outlook. She recorded that she intentionally discarded her American appearance and she transformed into a Jewish individual by adapting the style and culture of the Israel. She recorded her integration as, "I wanted to integrate as much as possible into my surroundings. I wanted to be part of Israel. I wanted to make my life there" (Epstein 266).

The migrated Jewish families were marked with void of ruptured past hovering in the domestic spaces. The second-generation victims were troubled by the suspension of the

Jewish current and driven towards the search of the severed Jewish roots. The migrated land could not present the Jewish individuals with Jewish essence comprised of social and cultural structures, which insisted the second generation to travel to the Jewish nation and Jewish related places to restore the fragments of their identity. The second-generation victims deprived of concrete Jewish identity, inclined towards the quest for sameness. Helen Epstein was distressed by the lacking of Jewish core in her fragmented personal identity and inadequate Jewish engagement in the United States. The nation of Israel provided homeland designated with Jewish elements to the Jewish individuals who were scattered across the globe for generations. Helen Epstein conceived that the assimilation into the Jewish society would restore her Jewishness and produce concrete personal identity characterized by Jewish essence. She contrasted her affinity to the migrated land and the nation of Israel as she was troubled by the lacking of sameness to the central core of the society in the United States whereas the nation of Israel provided her a tangible realm of Jewishness providing similarity to her Jewish roots. The Jews living in the migrated land were perceived as the outlying peripheral groups, distinguished from the central core of the specified country. The nation of Israel was established to provide a protected homeland to the shattered Jewish individuals, constructed with signifying units of Jewish essence. Helen Epstein mentioned that she could be identified as the member of the core group of the nation in Israel whereas her identity in United States was conceived as the periphery distinguished from the core. She recorded that the concrete structure of the Jewish identity in Israel as, "Jews were normal in Israel" (Epstein 266). As a non-native individual of the migrated land, she was pressurized to adapt to the cultural and religious engagements of the United States. She sensed personal harmony in the land of Israel as the nation was permeated with Jewish entities, which normalized her presence in the

community. The troubles of deprived sameness, peripheral identification and fragmented native roots were rectified by the travel to the nation of Israel. She recorded that the travel provided concrete Jewish identity structured on the similarity shared by the Jewish natives and normalcy attained by the Jewish engagements of the nation. She recorded it as,

In Israel, it seemed, all the troublesome questions of Jewish identity were resolved. On Chanukah, menorahs glowed on the top of public buildings as well as in the windows of private homes. One did not have to think about Christmas presents. Christmas and New Year's Eve passed almost unnoticed like any other days of the week. (Epstein 266)

Despite varied approaches employed by the generational victims, the collective Jewish identity is marked with void and ruptures caused by Jewish dispersion, affecting the concrete configuration of the Jewish essence and thereby resulting in the fragmented identity. As a descendant of the Holocaust survivors, Helen Epstein encountered traumatic anguish since her childhood, triggered by the latent presence of the Holocaust horrors. She was troubled by the uncommunicated memories of the past which caused a disjuncture in the flux connecting the central Jewish core. The United States of America did not provide concretized societal and cultural spheres which could enhance the Jewish core resulting in diminished Jewish identity. Helen Epstein's visit to Israel complemented the quest of restoring and restructuring her fractured Jewish identity. She assimilated into the societal units of Israel by actively participating in the cultural and social domain of the land. She recorded that her Jewish identity was recognized and enhanced in Israel which elevated her status from a marginalized individual in the emigrated land to a normalized unit of the collective Jewish core, attained through similarity. Helen Epstein's identity flux is configured by the Jewish

continuum encompassing the collective anguish of the Jewish community and the inherent binding elements of the group.

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