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**“WITNESS THROUGH THE IMAGINATION”:
GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS
AFTERMATH IN CYNTHIA OZICK’S *THE SHAWL***

ROXANA GHIȚĂ

Politehnica University of Timișoara

2, Victoriei Square, Timișoara 300006, Romania

roxana.elena.gh@gmail.com

Abstract: *While Holocaust historiography and literary criticism have typically been male-centred, on the presumption that the experiences of women and men were essentially identical, the aim of this study is to investigate gendered perceptions and representations of the Holocaust and its aftermath in Cynthia Ozick’s two-part fictional narrative The Shawl. The narrative focuses on the gender-based suffering of women and the murder of their innocent children and includes a brief account of a mother’s witnessing of her daughter’s electrocution in a concentration camp. The second part of the narrative represents an extended exposition of that atrocity’s psychological toll on the mother’s postwar life and her sense of being suspended in a liminal space between life and death, plagued by the constant intrusion of the Holocaust into her life.*

Keywords: *gender, Holocaust, testimony, trauma.*

Introduction

Holocaust historiography and literary criticism have typically been male-centred. Presuming that the experiences of women and men were essentially identical, historians spoke explicitly of men but implied that women were included in the category of men. Feminist theory and women's history have challenged the paradigm of ordering human experience according to a male norm and claiming that such a paradigm is universal.

Unlike what happens in most wars, in which women's suffering is a by-product of the conflict, Nazi Germany's annihilation program made the destruction of Jewish women a critical strategic objective (Kremer 1999:1). Jewish women, like all Jews, were first and foremost racial targets, because Nazi racial ideology defined Jewish life as a threat to the purity of Aryan blood and culture. As biology was uppermost in the Nazi genocidal ideology, Germans departed from the pattern of traditional warfare, which often spared female civilians and children from slaughter. Adolf Eichmann "was absolutely convinced that if he could succeed in destroying the biological basis of Jewry in the East by complete extermination, then Jewry as a whole would never recover from the blow" (Kremer 1999:2). This view of all women as "cell-bearers" (child bearers) doomed Jewish women, for in Hitler's view "one gestating Jewish mother posed a greater threat than any fighting man", and "every child that a woman brings into the world is a battle, a battle waged for the existence of her people" (Kremer 1999:2).

Joan Ringelheim is among the pioneers of women's Holocaust history. As Kremer points out, she is a forceful voice for recognition that "traditional attitudes and responses towards women, as well as gender-defined conditions, made women especially vulnerable to abuse of their sexuality and of their maternal responsibility – to rape, murder of

themselves and their children, the necessity of killing their own or other women's babies, forced abortion, and other forms of sexual exploitation – in the ghettos, in resistance groups, in hiding and passing, and in the camps” (1999:2). Ringelheim's work brings together the testimonies of female survivors and addresses gender differences in coping strategies, which focused on transforming starvation into communal sharing, rags into clothes, isolation into close relationships and surrogate families, and habits of raising children into care of fellow prisoners. Ringelheim called for scholarly investigation of the fact that women's capacities for enduring the traumas of dislocation, starvation, loss of traditional support structures, and physical and mental abuse were different from men's.

Like the historians, literary critics generally privilege men's experience and writing. Treatises by prominent male critics have often relegated all but a small segment of women's Holocaust writing to the periphery, when not consigning it to invisibility. Women's experiences are rarely central to the presentation of a “typical” Holocaust story. Women's memoirs are less frequently cited in scholarly studies, and significant books by women fall prematurely out of print. Apart from such authors as Charlotte Delbo, Nelly Sachs, Ida Fink and Cynthia Ozick, women's Holocaust writing remains at the edges of Holocaust literary criticism. Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Kosinski, Aharon Appelfeld, Paul Celan and a score of other men inevitably come to mind when one thinks about critical appraisals of Holocaust writing, whereas only a handful of women are accorded similar recognition.

However, in the United States, in the last thirty years or so, there has been an explosion of Jewish-American women's writing, most of it in the form of short stories. The three most influential women figures are Cynthia

Ozick, Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen. Along with this shift in the balance of power has come a movement towards fiction preoccupied with the legacy of the Holocaust. Until the 1970s, the Holocaust was not treated explicitly in post-war Jewish-American fiction. It was not until the publication of Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974) and Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* (1977) that the subject was brought to the foreground of Jewish-American fiction, as David Brauner points out (2001:*passim*).

The gendered suffering of women during the Holocaust is captured by one of America's most accomplished novelists of the Holocaust, Cynthia Ozick. Her major work, *The Shawl: A Story and a Novella*, first published in 1980 and 1983 as two separate narratives in the *New Yorker*, appeared in book form in 1989 with an epigraph taken from the Romanian-Jewish Holocaust survivor Paul Celan's famous poem *Death Fugue*. Inspired by a single line in William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, about babies being thrown against electric fences, *The Shawl* marks the sole instance in which Ozick locates her fiction within the death-dominated concentration camp universe and focuses on the gender-based suffering of women and the murder of their innocent children. Rosa Lublin, a young mother, her concealed infant, and Rosa's niece, Stella, struggle to survive a death march from one concentration camp to another. Rosa confronts the choice that tormented many Jewish mothers, that of whether to entrust her child to a stranger's goodwill or to struggle to preserve its life in the mother's own vulnerable setting. Rosa is so frail and thin that she successfully conceals Magda between her breasts under a shawl that covers them both. Unable to nurse, Rosa gives her baby almost all her food and the corner of a shawl to suck. But the moment the baby utters her first sound, a

Nazi guard hears her and throws Magda mercilessly against the electrified fence.

The dramatic presentation of Rosa's witnessing of the electrocution of her child evokes the ghastly experience of hundreds of thousands of Jewish women who witnessed the murder of their children, a central theme in women's Holocaust writing.

Historical Outline

After the founding of the women's camp in Auschwitz in March 1942, some of the women arriving there in prisoner transports were discovered to be pregnant. Until 1943, the camp authorities regarded pregnant women as an undesirable element, incapable of work. They were therefore recommended for killing either by an injection of phenol to the heart or in the gas chambers. In less frequent cases, SS doctors performed abortions regardless of the stage of the pregnancy, which usually led to the death of the woman. In very rare cases, women prisoners managed to conceal their pregnancy and give birth in secret. Nevertheless, after a certain time, mother and child would be discovered and sent to their deaths, or else the women had to take the tragic decision to murder their own babies in order to save their lives and those of the other prisoners, who were running the risk of being executed together with the mother for concealing a baby.

Officially, there was no allocation of underclothing, diapers or blankets for either mother and child. The camp authorities did not distribute any special food to infants, and did not supplement the food ration for new mothers. Moreover, it was rare for the malnourished and exhausted mothers to have any milk to breastfeed their babies, and this in most cases led to their death from starvation. According to Helena Kubica, "all of these

difficulties, and especially the malnutrition, poor sanitary conditions, and lack of medicine, led to a horrific death rate among the newborn infants” (2010:10).

Margita Schwalbova, a Jewish physician from Slovakia who was employed in the Auschwitz camp hospital after being deported there in March 1942, testified that

Every woman found to be pregnant was killed by phenol injection, or Dr. Bodmann terminated the pregnancy in such a way that every mother died from blood infection [...] Auschwitz was a death camp, not a life camp, and there was no need for young progeny.

Non-Jewish newborn infants who began coming into the world at a later period were left alive. It even looked as if these new regulations applied to all women. But this was not true. After a few weeks, the SS men suddenly rounded up the infants and their mothers and gassed them (in Kubica 2010:17).

In the first half of 1943, the urgent shortage of prisoner labour led to the suspension of the killing of women who were pregnant or about to give birth, but the newborn infants continued to be killed ruthlessly by the SS guards. The camp authorities banned midwives from cutting and tying the umbilical cord after delivery and the child was supposed to be thrown into a bucket filled with water, together with the placenta. The unbelievable cruelty deployed in murdering babies is revealed by the testimony of Dr. Boleslaw Zbozien, deported to Auschwitz in November 1941 and assigned to work in the camp hospital:

As a doctor, I undertook the organization of the hospital administration. I set up a small surgical outpatient clinic in a block number 22. [...] This block was also used for giving birth. The story of the children was one of the most tragic pages in

the history of the camp. Newborn infants were simply annihilated immediately. Murdering them was part of the job description for “Schwester Klara”, who simply drowned these children in a pail of water. (APMA-B, Statements Fond, vol. 70, p. 155)

Acting Out a Traumatic Past in Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl*

In *The Shawl*, the reader is directed both to Rosa’s pre-Holocaust history and to the psychological burden of her post-Holocaust survival. In *Rosa*, Ozick reverberates key images and tropes – shawl, fence and electricity – to link the two narratives, thereby suggesting the Holocaust’s pervasive intrusion into the survivor’s psyche.

The second story returns to the protagonist some thirty-five years afterwards, as she tries to live a survivor’s life in Miami. Holocaust imagery pursues Rosa in Miami, whose “streets were a furnace, the sun an executioner” (14), its barbed wire-fenced beach “littered with bodies” (1990:47). Rosa “felt she was in hell” (1990:14). Recurrent shawl, fence and electricity images effectively unite short story and novella, establishing the Holocaust as the genesis of Rosa’s troubled postwar life.

“Rosa” portrays the main character at fifty-eight, nearly four decades after the events recounted in “The Shawl”, and explores the protagonist’s prewar life as well as her wounded postwar psyche. For Rosa, “before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie” (1990:58). Increasingly tormented by the loss of her child and by public indifference to her Holocaust testimony, rather than finding healing with the passage of time and her distance from the site of her trauma, Rosa destroys her New York shop and withdraws into the hell of Holocaust memories.

By contrast with the Freudian view of trauma as temporary, resulting in the patient’s recovery and return to equilibrium with the passage of time,

post-Holocaust psychiatric theory posits lasting trauma born of a situation in which the individual not only “daily confronted death and degradation, but is in a context of a “new reality totally at variance with the framework of social and moral reality that one had once taken for granted” (Bergmann and Jucovy 1982:8).

Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between two forms of remembering trauma: the first, which he considers the desirable one, results in the process of “working through”, while the other is based on denial and results in “acting out” (2001:143). “Working through” is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma, so one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one back then, at the same time as realising that one is living here and now with a future ahead of one. By contrast, in “acting out”, one is haunted by the past and performatively caught up in the repetition of traumatic scenes – “scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop [...] it is as if one were back in the past reliving the traumatic scene” (LaCapra 2001:21). Therefore, “acting out” is related to repeating something compulsively, as people who undergo a trauma have the tendency to relive the past or even to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it. LaCapra also points to the fact that those traumatised by extreme events may resist working through because of what might be termed a “fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it” (2001:23). Part of this feeling may be caused by the guilt experienced at the thought that by working through the past in a manner that enables a reengagement in life, one would be betraying those who were consumed by the traumatic past. One’s bond with the dead may invest

trauma with value and this situation creates a more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma.

Rosa's acting out the trauma is reflected in the episode in which she meets Persky while waiting at the laundromat for the machine to finish its cycle. He is a pre-war Jewish immigrant to the United States, and when he begins a conversation with her they realise they are both originally from the same place, although she informs him that "My Warsaw isn't your Warsaw" (1990:19). After helping her fold her laundry, Persky invites her to have tea with him in a local cafeteria. While removing an eggplant seed caught under his denture, he notices something white on the floor near Rosa's laundry cart: "...a white cloth. Handkerchief. He picked it up and stuffed it in his pants pocket" (1990:26). In a remarkably effective association, Ozick connects Rosa's ambivalent relationship with Persky to her Holocaust experience. Paranoia and suspicion commonly associated with survivor syndrome in the psychiatric literature emerge in Rosa's response to the discovery, on her return from the meeting with Persky, that a pair of her underpants is missing. Ozick associates Rosa's obsessive search for the underpants with the repressed memory of her sexual violation in the camps. Suspicion of Persky triggers memories of her sexual assault. "The shame. Pain in the loins. Burning" (1990:34), and she imagines Persky as a "sex maniac...his parts starved" (1990:34). However, although Rosa acknowledges being raped by Germans more than once, she staunchly denies that Magda could have had a Nazi father, claiming that she was too ill at the time to conceive.

Supporting interpretation of the psychological connection between conflicted present and traumatic past is Ozick's imagistic fusion of Holocaust-era sexual assault and contemporary anxiety. As the sun goes

down over Miami, the narrow strip of hotels and beaches along which Rosa walks slowly appears to shade into “a kind of dreamscape” (Levine 2006:149). In her search for her missing underpants, Rosa strays onto a fenced private beach and slips into Holocaust association:

When she came back to the gate, the latch would not budge. A cunning design, it trapped the trespasser. She gazed up, and thought of climbing; but there was barbed wire on top [...] Her wrists were trembling. To be locked behind barbed wire! No one knew who she was; what happened to her; where she came from (1990:48).

Like many survivors who experience terror when they encounter images that remind them of the brutal past, despite the non-violent present postwar context, Rosa is so enraged by the fence that she castigates the hotel manager, asserting that barbed wire fences are inappropriate in American society. “Only Nazis”, she asserts, “catch innocent people behind barbed wire” (1990:51). The manager dismisses her comments, but Rosa’s provocative question, “Where were you when we was there?” (1990:51), challenges his ethics and by implication American Holocaust indifference. In the gate in front of her, Rosa sees the electrified fence into which Magda was thrown, and she finds herself once again exposed to the violence of her past traumatic experiences in the concentration camp, which belatedly break into and resonate through one another.

Rosa’s reenactment of the traumatic past is aggravated by her experiencing of the related downgrading of being a Holocaust survivor whose testimony goes unheard among Jews who cannot actually grasp the magnitude of the Holocaust, as they were living safely in the United States at the time when Jews in Europe were being exterminated by the millions.

Persky stands both for the “other strain” of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto towards whom Rosa’s anger was directed and for those whose failure to listen to her testimony of her Holocaust experience “condemns her to remain confined in a ghetto of silence” (Levine 2006: 163). Rosa’s memory of the Ghetto offers an image of the silenced survivor’s current sense of alterity, as well as of her place in and questionable hold on the present. As she recalls, standing on the bridge looking down on trams, which could not be rerouted, passing through the Ghetto, she seemed to be cut off both from the Jews within and from the Poles without, and in this point of suspension she sees the “most astounding thing”:

That the most ordinary streetcar, bumping along on the most ordinary trolley tracks, and carrying the most ordinary citizens going from one section of Warsaw to another, ran straight into the place of our misery. Every day, and several times a day, we had witnesses. Every day they saw us – women with shopping sacks; and once I noticed a head of lettuce sticking up out of the top of a sack – green lettuce! I thought my salivary glands would split with aching for that leafy greenness (1990:68).

shifts back to the present in order to note how “in this place now I am like the woman who held the lettuce in the tramcar. I said all this in my store, talking to the deaf. How I became like the woman with the lettuce” (1990:69). It is extremely important that this woman with the head of lettuce is singled out as an eyewitness (“Every day [...] we had witnesses. Every day they saw us”) who failed to bear witness to Rosa’s traumatic experiences. It is this daily passive violence, this humiliation of not being seen, acknowledged, of “gradually being made *to view oneself* as invisible” (Levine 2006:164) that returns to haunt Rosa in her store in New York and

then in Miami. The implication is that the witness cannot accomplish her function without having another witness, someone prepared to actively listen to and assimilate the traumatic experiences the protagonist had undergone during the Holocaust.

Furthermore, Rosa is frustrated not only by her failure to bear witness, to make her voice heard, but also by the fact that survivors are now reduced to objects of study, especially by researchers:

Consider also the special word they used: *survivor*. Something new. As long as they didn't have to say *human being*. It used to be *refugee*, but by now there was no such creature, no more refugees, only survivors. A name like a number - counted apart from the ordinary swarm. Blue digits on the arm, what difference? They don't call you a woman anyhow. *Survivor*. Even when your bones get melted into the grains of the earth, still they'll forget *human being*. Survivor and survivor and survivor; always and always. Who made up these words, parasites on the throat of suffering! (1990:36-37)

Rosa's diatribe reflects the post-war reality, as survivors were often reduced to being "bearers of testimony", which emphasises only what they can relate about the past. As Sara Horowitz points out:

This fixes the past as a snapshot, suggesting that memory, now transmuted into 'testimony', is rigid and unchanging, rather than fluid and dynamic. It discourages us from regarding them as full human beings, who make their own sense of the past but who also live beyond it, who forge relationships, who think about ethics, theology, relations, politics, and human meaning. It is to limit those who were victimized and bereaved by the Shoah to the role of human documents (2014:205).

Conclusion

Thus, the liminal identity of the protagonist of *The Shawl* is eventually configured by traumatic memory, silence and failure to bear witness, which blur the boundary between past and present and shape the Holocaust survivor as what Walter Benjamin calls a *dialectical image*, which cannot be metabolised into the teleological unfolding of progressive history.

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