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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Wrapped in Pain: *The Shawl* as a Narrative of Gendered Suffering

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#### Abstract

The present article is an attempt to present the Holocaust from a gendered perspective with special focus on *The Shawl* written by Cynthia Ozick. The text seeks to foreground the mental agony and suffering experienced especially by women during the event. The narrative focuses on Rosa who, despite struggling hard to protect her infant daughter Magda, fails miserably in the face of Nazi brutality. The text also provides a sense of the dehumanizing impact of the Holocaust and the physical and mental toll it takes on individuals through the character Stella, Rosa's niece. This study, taking into account this key aspect of the Holocaust, aims to establish the need for a gendered understanding of the event.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, Gendered suffering, double victimization, survival, Nazi brutality, motherhood

One major issue that initiated a debate among creative people and scholars associated with literature and films depicting the Holocaust was whether there is any need to hold the women's experiences of the event distinct from those of men. Many scholars have argued that women

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had faced “double victimization” during the Holocaust and it would be a grave injustice if this aspect is overlooked while dealing with the event. Joan Miriam Ringelheim in her article, “The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust”, included in the book *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* observes:

The testimony of survivors and the evidence of certain scholars suggest that ways of resisting and surviving are, in fact, differentiated by gender; and that women’s experiences of the Holocaust were different from those of men; and that women had different survival capabilities, different work, roles and relationships... .By ignoring the evidence of women’s experience and providing a so-called ‘universal framework’, we have misunderstood and mishandled questions dealing with resistance, survival, passivity and compliance... . Consequently, all generalizations and gender-neutral statements about survival, resistance, the maintenance or collapse of moral values, and the dysfunction of culture in the camps and ghettos must be reassessed from the perspective of women. (169-70)

Women encountered many gender specific victimizations like sexual humiliation and rape, apart from separation from their children. The mothers had to witness their children being thrown to the fire or shot dead merely because they were too young to do hard labour, a necessity if one were to have any chance of survival in the various concentration camps. The agony of concentration camp existence was accentuated by their inability to save their children who perished before their eyes. The uniqueness of the female experience of the Holocaust and the double victimization they endured necessitates a closer look at the narratives on the Holocaust that focus on the female experience. The double victimization has been largely relegated to the periphery in the Holocaust discourses for a long time:

Gender-specific experiences are overlooked in Holocaust literature, especially that written by men. The stories told seem to erase or obscure women. In the instance of erasure, the fact that the main person in the story is a woman seems irrelevant to the teller. Women’s lives are neutralized by a so-called ‘human perspective’, which on examination turns out to be a masculine one... . Women are there, but they are in the background. (Ringelheim 170)

An attempt to comprehend the female experience of the Holocaust would definitely add a new dimension to our understanding of this extremely complex event. The concern raised by many was that this attempt would, in a sense, demean or diminish the suffering endured by the male victims. They argued that this would render the claim of the universal nature of the suffering of the Holocaust irrelevant. But this apprehension seems misplaced, as even the scholars who advocate a gendered view of the Holocaust admit the universality of suffering which did not distinguish between the male and female victims. They stress that the gender differences in suffering is just one of the elements which comprise the concentration camp universe. There is a view among many scholars that the Holocaust was an all-encompassing event which does not warrant any gender distinction in its scrutiny. There is a tendency among

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scholars to ignore or overlook the gender-specific experiences as they contend that the suffering endured by the Holocaust victims is universal and that it is not proper to focus exclusively on the suffering of women. While this argument, however ethical and logical it might sound, does not consider the gender specific victimization that women had to endure. Joan Miriam Ringelheim asserts that “traditional constructs in ethics cannot be used to analyse the Holocaust because that language is applicable only to those situations of power in which there are real, concrete, morally significant alternatives and acts” (173).

Undoubtedly, the scope and scale of victimization of women in the camps was greater compared to men. Rape, sexual exploitation, forcible abortion etc. were some of the potential threats a woman faced in a concentration camp. Pregnancy also proved to be a threat to the existence of women as a pregnant woman hardly had any chance of survival. Women with small children were easy targets and often both the child and the mother were sent to the gas chambers. There is a need to examine the unique tormenting experiences endured by women vis-à-vis men in the camps. The fact that the women differ from men in certain physical and emotional aspects made them more vulnerable to victimization by the Nazis. The mental makeup of a woman, when she assumes the role of a mother is quite different from a man when he assumes the role of a father. The extent of vulnerability of women is far greater than that of men while in parental roles. The awareness about the need to comprehend the female experience of the Holocaust distinctly from that of the male grew as the discourses on the event got more nuanced. By successfully introducing the analytic tool of gender into the Holocaust discourse, it was possible to evolve a feminist perspective, refuting the claims that it is unnecessary to look at female experiences discretely. This strategy challenged the paradigm of ordering human experiences vis-à-vis the Holocaust from the male point of view and claiming that such a paradigm assumes universal significance.

The narrative which the study focuses on while discussing the unique experiences of women during the Holocaust is *The Shawl* written by Cynthia Ozick. The text comprises a short story (“The Shawl”) and a novella (“Rosa”). “The Shawl” is a searing narrative of the Holocaust in just two thousand words, capturing all its agony and brutality. Cynthia Ozick, though she was deeply concerned about the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jews over the centuries, has never in her writings, focused her attention exclusively on the Holocaust. “Ozick’s *The Shawl* is a significant exception to the decision to steer clear of the ‘interior’ of the Holocaust, whether this means the death camps or specifically Jewish suffering” (Vice 120). Though the male authors dealt with women characters in the camps, their concentration camp universe was populated largely by men and their experiences, which the male authors seem to suggest were universal, and therefore incorporated the experiences of women too. The female characters in the canon of Holocaust writing by men tend to be largely hapless victims, unable to resist and incapable of even attempting to fight the Nazi evil. Women characters who show remarkable strength and determination are largely absent in the Holocaust narratives by male authors. Nor have the unique experiences of women which warrant a gendered view of the Holocaust been a major concern of male authors dealing with the event. It is in this context that female authors

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like Cynthia Ozick who have always maintained that a gendered view of the Holocaust is essential to comprehend the event in its entirety assume significance. She seems to initiate a deep psychological exploration into the psyche of her characters, especially women, and narrate their experiences in a manner that male authors, however sincere they might be, are incapable of achieving while discussing women in the context of the Holocaust. Ozick's short story, "The Shawl" becomes relevant in this regard, for it deals with the agonizing experiences of a mother struggling to protect her daughter from the Nazis. As S. Lilian Kremer observes in her book, *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*:

Inspired by a single line in William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, "about babies thrown against the electrified fences", "The Shawl" marks the sole instance in which Ozick locates her fiction within the lice infested, disease ridden, death dominated concentration camp universe and focuses exclusively on the gender-based Holocaust suffering of women and the murder of their innocent children. (150)

The novella in the collection ("Rosa") is also equally significant and merits our attention, for it captures the life or lack of it of the mother, Rosa, after the tragic death of her daughter in the concentration camp. Rosa's post-Holocaust existence is, in reality, a death in life experience as she has lost all her hopes and even the desire to live after her infant daughter's death. The loss has a devastating effect on her and defines the trajectory of her afterlife which seems to have lost all its meaning. The storyline of "The Shawl" is deceptively simple. It opens with Rosa Lublin, a young mother, her infant daughter Magda concealed under a shawl and Rosa's niece Stella's struggle to survive a death march from one concentration camp to another. The mother, Rosa, is extremely careful about keeping her daughter out of sight of the Nazis, because if found out, the child will be butchered immediately. Rosa confronts the difficult choice many Jewish mothers faced, whether to hand over her child to a complete stranger hoping that the child would be safe with them or take the risk of keeping the child with themselves. Ultimately Rosa decides to keep the child with her since transferring the baby to someone else is fraught with danger. It is possible that the unexpected transfer would so unnerve the stranger that she would drop the bundle and inadvertently harm the child. Another possibility is that the stranger might reject the child and denounce the mother, thus putting the lives of both the child and mother in danger. Rosa thinks that Magda is safest underneath the shawl; "a squirrel in a nest, safe no one could reach her inside the little house of the shawl's windings" (4). The other character in the story, Rosa's niece, Stella, a thin girl of fourteen, is said to be jealous of Magda. But she herself is in a pitiable condition, like everyone else in a concentration camp, suffering from severe cold, tiredness and lack of food. "Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones" (3).

It is significant that Rosa does not feel any pity for her niece, Stella. It is as if all the finer feelings – love, compassion, sympathy – have dried up in Rosa, except for her daughter. This attitude is shared by Stella whose only feeling for Rosa's daughter is hatred and irritation. The author seems to suggest that it is quite natural in a place like the concentration camp where the only thing that matters is one's own survival. "They were in a place without pity, all pity

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was annihilated in Rosa, she looked at Stella's bones without pity. She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs" (5). Rosa is acutely conscious of the vulnerability of her child but is powerless in the face of Nazi brutality. The inability to protect her child from danger can be extremely traumatic for a mother, as it is universally accepted that it is the duty of the mother to protect her child from every perceivable danger. It is natural that Rosa feels that she has failed in her duties as a mother, as she is unable to provide her daughter the protection or nourishment she is expected to. It is not just the material comforts that Rosa fails to give her daughter. The emotional sustenance a mother is able to provide her child is also sadly lacking in Magda's concentration camp existence. In fact, the sense of despair is so pervasive that it engulfs the inmates to such an extent, that Rosa fails to provide her daughter with even a semblance of cheerfulness, which a normal existence outside the concentration camps would offer. Ozick says, "Sometimes she laughed – it seemed like a laugh, but how could it be? Magda had never seen anyone laugh" (6). It is significant that Ozick says Magda had been buried deep inside the shawl. The author seems to suggest that Magda's existence in the camp, inside the shawl, is a kind of death as she is unable to even attempt doing anything a normal child of her age would do. Even her mother is glad that she is like a living corpse because if Magda behaves like a normal child she would be butchered in no time. Her muteness and the fact that she did not learn to walk properly helps Magda to be out of sight of the Nazis. In normal circumstances, it would be a matter of great distress for the mother if the child is in any way deficient compared to normal children. But in the concentration camp the only thing that matters is survival, and if that becomes possible due to any kind of deficiency or abnormality, it is, in fact, welcomed rather than mourned. So, it is not at all surprising that Rosa is rather happy about Magda being "defective without a voice" (7). Then one day Stella takes the shawl away from Magda and she, who goes in search of it, gets killed by the Nazis. In fact, Magda was hurled into the electric fence that bordered the camp and is killed instantly:

And the moment Magda's feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms splashed against the fence, the steel voices went mad in their growling, urging Rosa to run and run to the spot where Magda had fallen from her flight against the electrified fence; but of course Rosa did not obey them. (10)

When the shawl is ultimately taken away from Magda, she loses the vital link that kept her alive. With the loss of the shawl, Magda's struggle for survival comes to an end. In the same manner, Rosa, when her child is taken away from her, loses all interest in life; her life becomes directionless, devoid of any desire or hope. The life in the concentration camps is such that Rosa is incapable of doing anything at all about the death of her daughter before her eyes which accentuates her sense of guilt. It is tragic that Rosa must remain a mute spectator, unable to raise even a finger against the Nazi brutality.

In "Rosa", the sequel to "The Shawl", Ozick portrays Rosa as groping in the darkness, not knowing what to do with her life after liberation, rendered meaningless, due to the loss of her daughter. Here, Ozick seeks to convey the unimaginable trauma of a mother

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who witnesses the electrocution of her child in a style which is deceptively simple, devoid of any sentimentality, which, in fact, adds to the emotional appeal of the narrative. The author seems to believe that employing sentimentality or seeking to over-romanticize the plight of Rosa would be an injustice to motherhood itself, as the emotional torment of her character is unrepresentable by employing conventional means of conveying grief and trauma. One is inclined to feel that Ozick agrees with C. Kahane who observes the in the article, “Dark Mirrors: A Feminist Reflection on Holocaust Narrative and the Maternal Metaphor”, The use of a traumatic breach in the mother-child relation to figure as unrepresentable historical trauma has a logical inevitability as well as a universal affective power” (164).

In the novella *Rosa*, Ozick portrays the existence of Rosa in the United States after her liberation from the Nazi camp. For Rosa, this afterlife is of no significance as she ceases to lead a normal life after the loss of her daughter. The author is able to create the sense of despair and hopelessness that pervades the life of Rosa. Thirty years have passed since the tragic death of her daughter, Magda, but time has not been a healer in Rosa’s case. The author seems to suggest that after the emotional trauma she has endured, witnessing the electrocution of her daughter, existence itself has become a burden for Rosa, which the inexorable passage of time can do nothing about. Ozick employs a style which is terse and unemotional, implying the inability of literature or art to capture the true mental state of a mother who has lost her daughter in such tragic circumstances. There is no overt display of emotion on the part of the protagonist, Rosa who lives a nondescript life in Miami. The only preoccupation Rosa has in her life is writing letters to her dead daughter Magda. For the world, Magda might be dead but for Rosa, she is still very much alive. Magda lives in an imaginary world created by Rosa, where her daughter lives hale and hearty. In one of the letters she writes to her daughter, “You have grown into a lioness. You are tawny and stretch apart your furry toes in all their power. Whoever steals you steals her own death” (15). In Miami, Rosa leads a lonely and secluded life; she has no friends or relatives, nor has she any abiding interests in life to keep her preoccupied in the new place. Before she came to Miami, she had been a resident of Brooklyn where she owned a secondhand furniture store. She left the place after demolishing her only means of livelihood, suggesting her total disengagement with normal life.

Ozick seems to suggest that after the loss of her daughter, Rosa has become a misfit in society. By deliberately destroying her means of livelihood for no reason whatsoever, Rosa announces her total withdrawal from the society: a complete disenchantment with the society and the conventional mode of its functioning seems to have triggered the self-destructive streak in her, finding its external manifestation in the desperate act of demolishing her shop. The element of destructiveness can be traced back to the unimaginably tragic events that occurred in her life during the concentration camp existence, changing the course of her life beyond recognition. Rosa tries to avoid contact with human beings and it is no different in the case of Simon Persky, an elderly man, who tries to be friendly with her. In fact, Rosa hates conversations and is content living in the shell of solitude she has created for herself. So initially

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she dismisses him by remarking curtly, “My Warsaw isn’t your Warsaw” (19), when he says that he was also born in Warsaw, Rosa’s native place. Rosa feels that those who have not undergone the horrors of the Nazi camps cannot comprehend her past, present or future. This is especially true in her case, as she has been through the most traumatic experience that can happen in any person’s life, witnessing the brutal murder of one’s child. Rosa is acutely aware of the incomprehensibility and incommunicability of her experience as a mother, which makes her contact with the outside world extremely difficult and even untenable. She tells Persky, “without a life...a person lives where they can. If all they got is thoughts, that’s where they live” (27-28). The statement more or less sums up Rosa’s attitude towards life. All she has got are her memories, which though mostly traumatic, sustain her in the solitude of her post-Holocaust existence. She simply refuses to think about her present or future as she is caught in a time warp; the memories shield her from the world. The reality of the world outside the barbed wires does not seem to hold any meaning for her. It is evident that Rosa has lost all interest in the conventional things human beings feel attached to like property and other belongings in her post-Holocaust existence. It is with her own hands that she has smashed her store, “Property misleads, brings false perspectives. The power to smash her own. A kind of suicide. She had murdered her store with her own hands” (46). Here Ozick deliberately uses terms that denote violence and brutality to drive home the point that her protagonist’s life is ruined forever by violence of the most vicious kind. The disinterestedness in matters relating to worldly possessions and material comforts has been due to the sense of despair that engulfs her child after the tragedy of losing her daughter. Rosa has lost her most valuable possession in the Nazi camp and in the afterlife, she cares for nothing else. “Rosa walked; she saw everything, but as if out of invention, out of imagination; she was unconnected to anything” (47).

Rosa’s relationship with Stella, the only person with whom she maintains any contact is, to put it mildly, uncomfortable. Rosa is always conscious of the fact that it was Stella who took away the shawl from Magda which led to her daughter’s death. Rosa, though she depends on Stella for money, has never been able to forgive her. Rosa severely criticizes Stella in the letters she writes to her dead daughter. “She was always jealous of you. She has a strain of dementia and resists you and all other realities ... .Stella Columbus! She thinks there’s such a thing as the New World” (41-2). Rosa is deeply conscious of the power of motherhood and its importance in the larger scheme of things. The power to another human being is something so valuable to her that she is not prepared to give it up for anything else in the world. She writes,

Motherhood – I’ve always known this – is a profound distraction from philosophy, and all philosophy is rooted in suffering over the passage of time. I mean the fact of motherhood, the physiological fact. To have the power to create another human being, to be the instrument of such a mystery. To pass on the genetic system... . A mother is the source of consciousness, of conscience, the ground of being, as philosophers say. (41-3)

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She also seems to believe in the indestructibility of the creation; she never accepts that her daughter is dead. In fact, the only thing that keeps her going is the belief that her daughter is alive somewhere. She writes to her daughter:

Stella says I make a relic of you. She has no heart. It would shock you if I told you even one of the horrible games I'm made to play with her. To soothe her dementia, to keep her quiet, I pretend you died. Yes! It's true! There's nothing, however crazy, I wouldn't say to her to tie up her tongue. (42)

It is apparent that Rosa is unwilling or unable to accept the reality of her daughter's death even though she had seen it with her own eyes. The author seems to imply that once Rosa accepts the reality, she will have no reason to continue living. Rosa derives the meaning of her existence from the feeling, though unreal, that her daughter is still alive. From the letter Rosa writes one becomes aware of the fact that she had been repeatedly raped in the camps by the Nazis. "I was forced by a German, it's true, and more than once, but I was too sick to conceive" (43). This predicament of Rosa who gets repeatedly raped even when she was exhausted, hungry and hardly able to walk reminds us of thousands of women who suffered at the hands of the Nazis in the camps. One realizes that the disengagement of Rosa from life is because of the imaginary world she has created for herself and her dead daughter; a world in which the mother and daughter lead a happy life. This imaginary universe seems to prevent the protagonist from any meaningful interaction with ordinary mortals. The story concludes with the announcement of Persky's arrival at the hotel in which Rosa stays. The author implies by the statement – "Magda was not there; she ran away from Persky. Magda was away" (70)- that in the imaginary world of the mother and daughter, there is no place for anyone else. This place would be shattered in the presence of a stranger, as it exists solely in the imagination of Rosa. Even when realizing and accepting the universal nature of the Holocaust, many scholars have asserted the need for a gendered view of the event as it would provide us with fresh insights and possibilities to comprehend from a broader perspective. Lately, the scope for widening the horizons of Holocaust research has been acknowledged by scholars and commendable progress has been made in this regard. Sue Andrews in the article titled, "Remembering the Holocaust – Gender Matters" contends:

The feminist interventions in the field of Holocaust studies, Jewish cultural studies and trauma and memory continue to make important contributions as an increasing number of cultural forms are produced representing Holocaust memory and history, much of it now being produced by children of Holocaust survivors. (19).

A gendered view of the Holocaust is, in fact, crucial as it would lead to a broader and clearer understanding of this complex event, especially, regarding the unique experiences of women and how it is represented in contemporary narratives on the Holocaust. The current endeavor in this area of study to foreground the unique experiences of women has undoubtedly opened up immense possibilities vis-a-vis the understanding of the complex, yet critical, issue of the relevance of a gendered view in contemporary Holocaust discourse.

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