

“THE SHAWL”, THE SUBALTERN, AND THE CASE OF THE SUBALTERN GENOCIDE

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Abstract: Holocaust studies post-World War II have found ways in intersecting to other studies within the Postmodern era. In 1980, a short story “The Shawl” was written depicting holocaust brutality done towards the Jews. The story revolves around a Jewish woman, Rosa, that lived through the bitterness of seeing her daughter, Magda, being slaughtered in a concentration camp. In the context of “The Shawl,” this article would like to describe the relationship between holocaust studies and the subaltern studies within postcolonialism. Furthermore, this article discusses if there are hints “The Shawl” invokes a sentiment for the Jews to take revenge towards their former oppressors. This article aims to further the argument “The Shawl” has no characteristics of taking revenge, which eventually leads to subaltern genocide. “The Shawl” functions better as a remembrance so generations of the future do not repeat the horrors of the past.

Keywords: “The Shawl”, Holocaust, Subaltern, Subaltern Genocide

INTRODUCTION

“The Shawl” is an award-winning short-story, the O’Henry Award, that was written by Cynthia Ozick. “The Shawl” tells of three main characters living in horrid conditions during the Third Reich regime. The three main characters are Rosa (grown woman/Magda’s mother), Magda (the baby girl/Rosa’s daughter), and Stella (teenage girl/Rosa’s younger sister). Cynthia Ozick constructed a narrative based on the Nazi genocide. She brings the portrayal of a particular group of people that was silenced by the boot of tyranny. Not just in terms of a group of people, she also brings forth women’s experience in this time of calamity. From Rosa’s point of view, Ozick portrayed the figure of a mother in the time of the Holocaust. The story deals mainly on a Jewish woman, Rosa, and her ordeal when her daughter, Magda, was slaughtered. The experience shook Rosa, and the trauma she felt was unrepairable. After the disruptive nature of her role and identity as a mother, Rosa turned lifeless and became obsessive with the memories of her dead daughter. Rosa imagines still living this life with Magda. This loss of the

daughter became the central theme of the short story. Ozick claims Holocaust survivors continue to suffer not only because of their past experiences, these survivors also suffer because they start to define themselves by the absence of their loved ones (Uzun, 2014). One can see the difficulty that these victims had to endure.

Many investigations have been done with this story after its publications, especially in the field of psychoanalysis. Gamze Sabanci Uzun investigated in her article the characteristics of a Jewish woman facing the traumatic event. With this event, endless mourning became the primary reaction to the Holocaust for the victims. Also, she furthered general criticism by focusing on the role of a mother, who is a victim, during the Holocaust. Her deep psychoanalysis towards the narrative, especially in Rosa, is something to be read and considered (Uzun, 2014). Another work focusing on the psychology aspect of the narrative is by Andrew Gordon. He examines the symbolism of “The Shawl”. He argues that the narrative requires for illusion and magical thinking as a form of defense against anxiety

and trauma. However, also mentioned in his studies, a healthy illusion, the shawl as a substitute for the desired mother figure, can eventually become an insane delusion (Gordon, 1994). In respect of other fields of studies, Meisha Rosenberg focuses “The Shawl” in terms of evaluation with a Midrashic code. She argues how Ozick used the Midrashic mode in “The Shawl” to construct a fictional world of the stories around the Holocaust while never losing and forgetting the historical reality of these events (Rosenberg, 1999). Jacek Partyka argues on the key concepts of nostalgia and self-hatred offer a new perspective on the interpretation of a text within “The Shawl” (Partyka, 2017).

METHOD

Descriptive qualitative method is used in this article. According to George (2008:7), the data in descriptive research concerns with the text—The results are captured in words, images, or non-numeric symbols. Data counting does not have any concern in the study. The concern of this writing is based on the interpretation and analysis of the object with the assistance of correlated literature.

There are several steps in conducting research on the object and analyzing it. First, reading the short story “The Shawl” by Cynthia Ozick. Second, take notes and consider the intrinsic elements of the short story “The Shawl” by Cynthia Ozick. Third, collect related quotations by the statement of the problem and analyze the collected quotes from the short story.

Subaltern Similarities

Through the narrative, one may read, the conditions faced by the main characters in “The Shawl” fit the description of the subaltern concept constructed by Spivak. The Jewish women in the Nazi concentration camps were oppressed or considered as the Other. Also, they consist of people who cannot speak and whose voices could not be heard. El Habib Louai mentioned that when Spivak was faced in the difficulty of specifying the realm of subalternity, she turned to discrimination towards women. She reconsidered to shift the issues of subaltern groups by dealing with the problems of gender, particularly Indian women during colonialism. Through her exploration of the history of deprived women, Spivak can

identify and elaborate the original demarcation of the subaltern through her in-depth studies of experiences and struggles of women in general (Louai, 2012). Spivak noted, “The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is ‘evidence’; instead, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow” (Spivak, 1988).

Cynthia Ozick’s vivid and artistic way of illustrating the Holocaust in “The Shawl” have led many readers in assuming she witnessed similar experiences to the ones she elaborated in her narrative. Ozick was born in 1928. However, she never took part in any concentration camp. Her Lithuanian Jewish heritage and background permit her in taking real accounts of the Holocaust. She transformed them into poetry in prose. In the story, Ozick brings to the spotlight gender-specific conditions. She focused on women that had to endure Nazi concentration camps. While women may endure the same hostility, if not many other unimaginable cruelties, as men during these hardships, they still manage in using their natural skills to survive. They could still also demonstrate love, care, and selflessness amid worst circumstances. Cynthia’s parents, Celia and William Ozick, came to the United States from Russia. Cynthia was born in the United States. Celia and William had the best intentions in keeping the family’s Jewish heritage intact by sending Cynthia to Jewish schools. Eventually, this condition led the way for Catholic children in her neighborhood to taunt her. It was perhaps the direct witness of the misunderstanding and hatred the society felt for Jews (Strandberg, 1994:30-38).

Ozick took the time to minimize the talk of men, besides the guard, in this story. This condition sets Ozick to give a voice for the women. The voice was concentrated in speaking the experience in the camps without their husbands and children. The voice of women was undoubtedly lost in the rigidity of history books. Traditionally, the suffering and death of Jewish women were unheard of. Now,

their voice has been rediscovered with the recent finding of diaries, journals, and archives of female victims and survivors of the Nazi Holocaust.

In Ozick's story, the absence of Jewish men indicates the separation between Jewish men and women in the camps. It may also imply that the experience of women were very different from the men in the camps. Gender, in this case, has a slightly different meaning than sex. The latter refers to the biological difference in man and woman, and the former refers to the expectations (cultural and social) given on each group of people. This distinction led the Nazis to create punishment based on gender. After reading "The Shawl", one can quickly identify the subalternity of women in the camps. Despair and depiction of horror can be read from the first sentence until the last. From the top, we can read the environment which was faced by the female characters:

"cold, cold, the coldness of hell". (Ozick, 1990:3)

Straight away from the start, we have described the horrific condition which surrounds the main characters. These main characters are suffering despair, and throughout the whole story, there are no hints of relief or detachment from these horrific conditions. The story, in general, brings a vivid explanation of suffering, oppression, and death. The significance of the Holocaust and the Subaltern is pain and suffering, so much pain that hell feels cold.

We can also observe the depiction where activities of the main characters are not of their own will:

*"Magda took Rosa's nipple, and Rosa **never stopped walking**, a walking cradle."* (Ozick, 1990:3)

*"On the road, they raised **one burden of a leg after another**."* (Ozick, 1990:5)

The quotes above give us the activity of non-stop walking. This activity was not based on the characters own will or decision. The process of the "walking non-stop" is of external force and mandatory. How do we know it is given and mandatory? The writer also gives a vivid depiction of the scarcity of goods and physical conditions of the characters while they are in this non-stop walking:

"There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed."

"Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones."

"Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in a trance, arrested in a fit." (Ozick, 1990:3-4)

Above, we can see the scarcity of goods and physical weariness in all the characters. Magda, as a growing baby, does not have the proper amount of milk that she needs. Stella is depicted as lacking sufficient flesh. She is ravenous; knees were tumors on sticks, and elbows the size of chicken bones. Rosa is in a painful condition such as someone in a faint, in a trance. With these depictions of scarcity and lack of provision related to the activity of walking, the activity of never stopped walking is being forced upon them. The walking process is not of their own will. They have no say of this activity. They are being forced to do things that are of a burden to them.

The despair path is also marked with the use of language as an identity. Aforementioned, the writer has given some depiction of the lack of goods and poor physical/mental condition of the characters. The writer, in the story, continues to show the horrid conditions of the three characters vividly. Other horrific depictions of the main characters are,

Magda: *"lived (only) to walk"; "the spindles of her legs could not hold up her fat belly"; "It was fat with air, full and round."* (Ozick, 1990:5) *"Then, Stella took the shawl away and made Magda die."* (Ozick, 1990:6)

Stella: *"did not menstruate".* (Ozick, 1990:5)

Rosa also *"did not menstruate"; "learned from Magda how to drink the taste of a finger in one's mouth"; "all pity was annihilated in Rosa"; "She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs."* (Ozick, 1990:5)

The writer gives many details of the main characters, but not many details are written of the victimizer. The focus to heavily mention the bitter conditions of the characters which are depicted shows the identity of the writer, which sympathizes with the characters. The binary opposition and the placing of the Other are obvious. The depictions of the oppressors are the words:

"they might shoot" (Ozick, 1990:4) and *"they would shoot"* [three times in the 15th Paragraph] (Ozick, 1990:10)

Holocaust victims viewed the experience within the camps as dehumanizing physical and mental torture. More specifically, for women, the experience was a form of dewomanizing. Sexual violence towards women and girls is one of the most recurring wartime abuses and remains a critical women's human rights issue (Alison, 2007). There are differences in applying rape, coerced sex, prostitution, and abuse, not least in how women interpret their experiences (Waxman, 2017; Burds 2009). Moreover, the condition of being hatred as a Jew was piled with the fact that they could bear Jewish offspring. Women had to endure more hatred because of the condition they were the door to continue the Jewish bloodline. In several accounts, women who clung to their children were immediately put down. One can see this incident at the end of the story.

Moreover, 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. (Ozick, 1990:9-10)

Rosa saw that Magda, her daughter, was thrown to the electric fence of the camp. In reaction, she could not run, embrace, and grieve for her. Shots will be fired if she moved a muscle closer to her child. The compounding negative of being Jewish and able to bear Jewish children has led some people to view the ability to bear children as a weapon against women in the camps. This aspect is quite similar to the women who are trapped in the postcolonial subaltern of India. There consist of polarities that contend them to be silenced. Sati women as a subaltern group were lost between two polarities. They are stuck between the British humanist discourse calling for individual freedom of these women and the Hindu native policy calling for voluntary participation in the ritual. The conflict between both positions produced two different discourses with no possible solution. Women, as the subaltern continues to open new venues for future research on human rights (Adami, 2016).

As if the Jewish people did not suffer enough in Hitler's Germany, women of the

Jewish people had a tougher obstacle to climb. Women are structurally written out of the narrative of the tyrant's perspective. These women can be categorized as people, in postcolonial terms, which are limited or no access to the cultural imperialism. One can see that interaction can be built from the victims of the Holocaust and the subaltern people of India. They were considered the lowest of the low. Through the oppressive regime of the National Socialist towards the Jews or the ruling British Empire in India, the context of the subaltern as people who have no voices can be considered within the setting of the Nazi Holocaust.

Subaltern Genocide

With the similarities between Jewish women in the Nazi camps and the subaltern of India, the focus now leads to the discussion of subaltern genocide. Firstly, one needs to elaborate more on this subaltern genocide. Initially, genocide studies captured the interest of the audience in 1944. The prominent founder of the genocide studies is the jurist from Poland, Raphael Lemkin (Cooper, 2008; Moses, 2011). The term 'genocide' traditionally has been depicted as a crime committed by the system of the state against minorities who are vulnerable. The act of genocide was done in the state's territory or beyond its borders. In other words, the Nazi Holocaust, which was implemented towards the European Jews is considered the "prototypical" genocide. The focus is the campaign of a systematic, coordinated, bureaucratic power of a nation that fully justifies the goal of mass extermination towards particular people (Jones, 2009).

In defining the subaltern genocide, one can consider beforehand the term by Vahakn Dadrian, namely the *retributive genocide* (Dadrian, 1975). Even when definitions of genocide do not require the power of the state, there is still embedment of the strong sense that genocide is the infliction of a socially and politically dominant groups over the subordinate groups. There exist a strong notion of how retributive genocide killing captures the dynamic of subaltern genocide. The oppressed group has risen above and seek to gain revenge, also liberation by using the same genocidal tactics as their oppressors. However, in retributive genocide, the main

push of mass killing is still imposed by the dominant towards the dominated. Subaltern genocide has a different set of retributive dynamic. The dynamics that emerge from the dominated group. Interestingly, the UN Genocide Convention does not contain a statement on the nature of the offender and the necessary power relationship between the offender and the victim (Jones, 2009).

One profound case in the subaltern genocide studies is the unexplored role of subaltern actors in genocide studies literature. With a good look at the reading and using deconstruction in achieving new insights and useful analyses, the so-called "canon" of genocide studies can be investigated and eventually gives clear traces of subaltern genocide. For example, let us look at two studies which were initially considered the "prototypical" genocide: Cambodia (1975-1978) and Rwanda (April-July 1994).

In 1975, the Khmer Rouge took power in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. They succeed in the effort after many years fighting and combating government forces. They gradually increased their influence and power in the Cambodian countryside. After they forced the U.S. regime out of the nation, new leaders of the state developed a compelling ideology of class revenge. It was unique because many of their leaders, such as Pol Pot, were not peasants from the village but were educated city dwellers who went abroad and received a Western education. One of their earliest actions was to empty the many refugees in the capital city and obligated the residents, in total at least 2 million people, to migrate in rural areas.

In many cases, these residents were starved to death or executed on the spot. As with the brutal actions of the ruling regime, large sections of the country—especially in the east near the Vietnamese border—were accused of being traitors and rebellious. In the range of 2 million Cambodians, out of 8 million, died during the Khmer Rouge regime. It took some time for genocide scholars to admit the events that occurred in Cambodia was considered a case of genocide. One reason for this delay was the victims were, in fact, the same Khmer ethnicity as the oppressors, even though ethnic and religious minorities were of prime concern as targets. The other reason for the delay was the new status of the Khmer

Rouge as the honorary apprentice of both the United States and China. Irrespective of their communist ideology and the mass killings of the past, the Khmer regime was considered a pivotal obstacle towards the expansion of Vietnam during that time.

Rwanda in 1994 is considered to be the fastest and most intensive genocide in history. The film adaptation of the conflict, *Hotel Rwanda*, gives us portrayals of the horrific circumstances between the Hutu and Tutsi. The foreign peacekeepers only acted to evacuate few whites remaining in the country when Hutu extremists launched their campaign against the Tutsis. Not much help came from the international community in terms of intervention. The Rwandan capital, Kigali, was turned red by the blood of the Tutsis in a matter of minutes and not much can be done to stop the slaughter. After the genocide in the capital, the campaign turned to every corner of the country. The Butare region, in the south, held out against such campaign. After the murder of the moderate leadership in that region, the genocide was unstoppable in the region. The victims were herded into places supposedly a haven for refugees, specifically religious and educational institutions. After entering the premises of these institutions, acts of close-up killing was the norm means of extermination. Other methods of slaying the Tutsis was hunting them down in small groups, scouring the fields, forests, hills, and marshes. The genocide campaign of the Hutu slowly receded after the Rwandan Patriotic Front which consisted of many Tutsis pushed the Hutu extremists out of Kigali, towards the southwest of the country, and eventually pushed to exile across the border of Zaire.

At first sight, one could see the tragedy in Cambodia, and Rwanda are considered the typical form of genocide. Both instances were state-initiated and state-directed. The genocide process follows the familiar pattern of the traditional meaning of genocide. However, these two examples also had an unusually high degree of popular participation in the killing process. In this focus of popular participation, one could see the element of subaltern genocide most strikingly. The Cambodian instance, after the power takeover of the Khmer Rouge, their militant forces were the hundreds of thousands of peasant squads. These peasants have endured the terror of air

bombings by the United States in previous years. In the times of the bombings, the concentrated campaign for the B-52 bombers was the countryside. The parts that were spared from destruction were the cities. In a sense, a binary opposition crippled the minds of the peasants living in the bomb-infested areas. The city dwellers of Cambodia, through the eyes of Cambodian peasants, are viewed as traitors because of their active cooperation with the foreign superpower. The urban folks are also considered as corrupted and lazy people. They were no match in contesting the nobility of the peasants. The urbanites were the new people and contrasted as a negative match against the old people—the peasants—who consider themselves the backbone of Khmer identity. These binaries are the product of the communist revolution in the country.

One could say the same in Rwanda. The Hutu people were the majority of the population in the country—about 85 percent. The Hutus in Rwanda had a long history of being discriminated by Tutsi overlords, and heavy oppression occurred during the colonial rule of Belgium after World War I. The Belgian colonists did switch their stances in support of the Hutu people and Rwanda became an independent nation on 1959 under the Hutu regime. However, the subaltern status still haunts the Hutu population. The image of power still endured in the Tutsi people. They were taller and more refined physically. In terms of material gain, the Tutsis were more intelligent, wealthier, and successful. Tutsi women were in stereotype is seen more sexually attractive. These subaltern frustrations and hostilities were critical points in the genocide that colored Rwanda blood red in April 1994.

FINDINGS

“The Shawl” Calling for Blood?

History has seen instances of revenge brought forth of the Jewish people (on a personal level) towards Nazi convicts after the Holocaust (Sack, 2000). Of course, the grand scale of subaltern genocide, for instance, in Cambodia and Rwanda, never took place for the revenge of the Holocaust. Jackson and Choi give a vivid detail on revenge, its psychological properties, and its role in cultural evolution (Jackson & Choi, 2019). Revenge has set the tone in the history of humanity. However, there

is another history to be told, namely, of displaced revenge, of emotions and practices that might take a thousand different forms. The insistence on objective testimony, or justice rather than revenge, could itself be a form of displaced revenge. When Jews bore children on German soil after the war, this perhaps is one form of displaced revenge of displaced people asserting their presence in the very place that had tried to eradicate them. At the same time, their brethren abroad might not set foot on German soil for the same reason. Remembering and invoking the past could be a displaced form of revenge (Lang, 1992).

“The Shawl” as a narrative for remembering the horrors of the Holocaust is more refined within the category of displaced revenge. Nothing in the narrative suggests the terror which unleashes or support the concept of subaltern genocide to be applied. When conditioned during the Holocaust, the Jews, especially their woman, can be categorized as a subaltern group. However, revenge in the size of a full-scale genocide did not materialize. Revenge can also be paid forward in creating a new relationship based on peace and equality. “The Shawl” gives us this sort of perspective where the tragic horror of the past can be remembered to better the qualities within humanity. Creating and building civilization is what the survivors did by adopting surrogate families and using their skills in order to survive the Holocaust. Amidst the many accounts of violence and maltreatment, many more stories were of nurturing and sisterhood. Such accounts like “The Shawl” illustrates, despite the torture and horrific experiences, the women of the camps remained selfless while enduring unimaginable physical and psychological pain.

CONCLUSION

Winston Churchill once said, “Those that fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it.” One history we do not want to repeat is the annihilation of specific or any groups of people in the name of racial hatred and political correctness. Therefore, it is quite essential that we learn the wrongs of the past and make sure those wrongs do not infiltrate the present and future. The Holocaust was a systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of around six million Jews by the Nazi regime. When evil has a firm legal ground, it is

bound to destroy and annihilate. Many poets and writers have created literature readings for the goal to learn history, so we are not doomed to repeat it. "The Shawl" is one short-story which is densely plotted during the Holocaust. "The Shawl" does not pose any sentiment which gives a sense or proof of the subaltern genocide within its story, even

though the strong urge to do so is excellent. Furthermore, the narrative is best considered as a remembrance of the past, and through narratives such as this, the process of education and learning may be achieved so humanity can learn from the horrors of history and not repeat the same mistakes in the future.

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