



Archiving Memory: An Analytical Reading of Postmemory in Cynthia Ozick's Holocaust Narrative 'The Shawl'

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Abstract

The collective memory of a community that experienced horrendous, traumatic events can be preserved and transmitted through variegated retrospective media for the knowledge of posterity. Such traumatic incidents are monumentalized in historical artefacts, images, stories and memorials. The post- Holocaust era has witnessed the boom of collective tales recited by victims and survivors which constituted the understanding of history for generations who were not part of these traumatic events. This paper aims to trace the idea of postmemory encapsulating the repercussions of significant experiences beyond the first generation. The study observes a 'belatedness' in the narratives that evoke a parental past. This paper articulated analytically Cynthia Ozick's Holocaust memory narrative 'The Shawl' as a source of postmemory of trauma to posterity. It studied the transformative potential of the narrative to constitute a historical repertoire for a generation that is not part of the victimhood. In addition, the paper also commented on the construction of cultural trauma and hence, the identity of descendants through such fictional mnemonic tales. The analysis proved that an account of a direful incident or experience of the past performs the role of an agent of postmemory. It crystallized a traumatic memory, shared among a community, for future generations to feel a sense of belonging and identity. The study highlights the scope of binding posterity to a common past through literary media. Thus, it transcends to be an archive or historical document worthy of future reference.

Key words: postmemory, Holocaust, collective memory, trauma narrative, cultural memory, concentration camp

Memory is an amalgamation of learned knowledge and identity. The exploration of the complexities and mysteries of memory has been of keen interest to men of letters and scholars since time immemorial. Critics argue that the late years of the 1970s witnessed the significance of memory in both academics and society. “Memory boom”, as it is labelled, where the “nation-states turned to the past as a basis for shoring up their legitimacy” (Olick 10). Therefore, “In the commercial sphere, these transformations in political legitimization were supposedly matched by a commodification of nostalgia, a popularization of history, and an interest in "memory," both individual and collective” (Olick 18). The emergence of the “memory industry” corresponds to the rise of Memory Studies as a flourishing academic discipline. Memory Studies is a multidisciplinary area of domain that incorporates history, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, literature and many more. It is a critically substantial field of inquiry. Therefore, Memory Studies is encapsulated in the scholarly paper, “Memory Studies, a Brief Concept Paper” as,

A multidisciplinary field which began with individual memory growing outward to focus on broader dimensions of social memory and the politics of public remembering, especially those channelled through communications media. The focus has generally been on how these forms of remembering operate as collective representations of the past, how they constitute a range of cultural resources for social and historical identities, and how they privilege particular readings of the past and subordinate others (Bosch 2).

Memory boom is about history. It defines memory as an agent which mediates the past with the present and the future. It is elemental to testify the historical events that are unrecorded in written documents. Thus, memory appears to be the foundation stone of historiography. It is the custodian of history writing, thereby attesting to Cicero’s statement that history is the life of memory. Like memory, the concept of trauma as a deeply felt response to some horrendous past occurrences has both individual and communal significance. In the 19th century, the discourse of trauma as a distinct area of interest in memory initiated as an aftermath of World War I. Traumatic memory narratives, either individual or collective, form a dialogue with everyday discourse. Such narratives build a nexus between the past and the present and contribute to identity formation. The repercussions of traumatic incidents are solidified in historical artefacts, images, stories and monuments. It is presented in images, textbooks, statues, memorials and narratives. Traumatic memory is reinterpreted through these retrospective media. For instance, the preservation and transmission of Holocaust memory can be through the material and the immaterial artefacts. Images, heirlooms, public monuments, memorials and even music and art are a matrix of societal remembrance.

The trajectory of Memory Studies as a discipline witnessed its heyday in the post-Holocaust era as Pierre Nora’s oft-quoted lines remark, "Whoever says memory, says Shoah". The Jewish Holocaust was a systematic, dictatorial, state-planned execution of over six million Jews under the Nazi regime in Germany. The hierarchical idea of “racial superiority” embedded in the minds of the Nazis resulted in mass murder. The recorded first-hand experiences of the survivors and their children formed a specific part of understanding history. Since 1945, the Holocaust memory has taken a paradigm shift from a “progressive” narrative to a “trauma” narrative or, as sociologist Jeffrey Alexander calls it a “trauma drama”. The innumerable tales of

Holocaust victims and survivors collectively constituted the cosmopolitan memory. The understanding of the horrifying memories read along with narratives resulted in the formation of trauma culture.

Cynthia Ozick is a literary icon of the Jewish American literary circle. She is an eclectic writer who habituated herself as an essayist, poet, novelist and playwright. Her contributions have improved the global view of Jewish culture in the American literary canon. She is hailed for her unique portrayal of female subjects and the intergenerational transmission of Jewish culture through her stories. Her fiction is celebrated as a “Jewish writer oxymoron”. According to Ozick, to be a Jew is to be a part of civilization as,

a civilization with a long, long history, a history that is, in one way of viewing it, a procession of ideas. Jewish history is intellectual history. And all this can become the content of a writer's mind; but it isn't equal to a writer's mind. To be a writer is one thing; to be a Jew is another thing. To combine them is third thing. (Teicholz 172).

Therefore, Ozick’s works are a celebration of the Jewish quintessence. As a religious follower of liturgical literature, Judaic thought, identity and existence are of significant thematic concern. This idea of Judaism and casting her characters in the post-World War scenario can be traced back to her early matured productions such as *Trust* (1966), *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971), *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (1976), and *Levitation: Five Fictions* (1982) and her essay collections such as *Art & Ardor* (1983), *Metaphor & Memory* (1989). She gained wide popularity and her instant success culminated in bagging the O. Henry prizes repeatedly for three times and other recognizable honours. In the opinion of critic Meisha Rosenberg, “Cynthia Ozick’s writings can be viewed in light of a midrashic mode by virtue of her need to sustain Jewish tradition in the wake of great devastation—the Holocaust”. The horrors of Holocaust patronized the artistic consciousness of Ozick. This is apparent in her works such as “The Pagan Rabbi,” “Levitation”, *The Messiah of Stockholm* and *The Shawl*. Even though the author is not a part of the survivor community, her fictions are rooted in the historical reality of World War II. Moreover, the beauty of her fictional works rely on its fine co-dependence with historicity.

In recent times, the literary representations of memory are designated by the term “fictions of memory”. Broadly speaking, the genre encapsulates the tales told by individuals or cultures to affirm their identities. In addition, it hints at the narratives that reflect on the working of memory. Ozick’s fictions of memory reverberate the Judaic vision in American culture, a culture that reminisces the terrors of the Holocaust. Peter Kerry Powers, in ‘Disruptive Memories’ comments as,

“In re-imagining the past as well as envisioning life in the past, Ozick’s literary world reinforces a contemporary Jewish identity-which is commonly bond with Judaism and the history of the Holocaust as widely commented upon. In a nutshell, Ozick attempts to recreate through her fiction collective memories of Jewish Americans, particularly the Holocaust and immigration experience (23).

Ozick's short fiction 'The Shawl' stands in a lofty position among her other fiction as it sublimated the essence of the Holocaust in terse sentences. The historical reality of Auschwitz is portrayed in a fictional mode embracing the poignant idea of the separation of a child from mother in the camps. The sensational short story first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1980, carrying a miniature rendering of the Holocaust. The story is a typical exemplification of historical remembrance. It narrates through the maternal recollection or process of remembering by Rosa Lublin, who lost her daughter Magdha in the Nazi concentration camp. The historical relevance of the work infers the horrific regime of the Nazi in Germany. After their ascension, they built concentration camps to imprison the Jew community. They were forced to live under appalling and deplorable living conditions. Furthermore, children under the age of 12 were thrown into electric fences to eradicate the new generation. Rosa is one such hapless mother who lost her fifteen months old child before her eyes in the concentration camps. The enormity of her anguish can be noticed in the concluding lines as she watches her Magda, her "yellow butterfly", her "yellow cup of sun" take her last flight.

'The Shawl' is an internationally acclaimed holocaust narrative read and studied along with narratives of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi. Ozick recounts the life of a Jewish woman who loses her only child in the most unfortunate way. The presentation of Rosa as a victim of double marginalization; foremostly as the child bearer and secondly as bearer of the weight of her own 'race'. The victimization of the protagonist is paralleled with the pathetic condition of concentration camps devoid of any human consideration. The concise narrative is refrained from any linguistic connection with conventional Holocaust literature. It is devoid of words such as 'concentration camp', 'Nazi', 'Holocaust' and so on. Furthermore, the stylistic proficiency of the author is seen in her symbolic understanding of shawl as a metaphor for the Holocaust. In conclusion, Ozick created art out of historical reality. The theorist Dominick LaCapra comments that the historians' keen interest in memory is that it poses questions to history regarding its problems that are either alive or inculcated in values or emotions.

This paper traces the idea of postmemory in Ozick's 'The Shawl'. The knowledge of a Holocaust survivor in this narrative is a source of postmemory of trauma to posterity. Basically, the memory in this fictional work transcends to be an archive or historical document worthy of future reference. The critic Marianne Hirsch delineates the concept of postmemory as intricate repercussions of significant experiences beyond the first generation. She encapsulates the idea as,

"...describe the relationship that the generation after those who experienced trauma directly bears to those experiences. The second generation "remembers" not because they were there, but through stories, images and behaviours that transmit the traumas of the first generation to their offspring"(346).

The concept itself defines the characteristic feature of intergenerational memory transfer. A memory that is part of the older generation is transferred to the next generation through several means. A 'belatedness' is observed in the narratives that evoke a parental past. The critics term the phenomena as 'absent memory', 'belated memory', 'inherited memory' and '*memoire des cendres*' and so on. These terms synonymously

connote postmemory. It cannot be conceived as a method or movement, rather it is the structure of inter and transgenerational transfer of traumatic experience and knowledge.

Meisha Rosenberg in the article 'Cynthia Ozick's Post-Holocaust Fiction' comments, "a crucial tactic Ozick uses to represent the Holocaust without mytho-poeticizing is to stay true to the historical facts". Also, she was inspired by William Shirer's historical document *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Therefore, her work can be traced as a source of postmemory studies. 'The Shawl', with its direct address to the environment of concentration camps and the tragedy of throwing young children against electric fences, constitutes a historical repertoire for a generation who is not part of the victimhood. It has a mimicking potential, a potential to imitate history thereby transforming itself into a memorial. The horrid conditions of the camps are described in Ozick's words as "Stella, cold, cold, the coldness of hell" and "But if she moved out of line they might shoot"(1). The narrator describes the place as a place without pity. Her chief characters such as Rosa, Magda and Stella represent the inmates of the camps. The frailty and malady can be understood in the following lines of the narrator as,

Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones...There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed...Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit...She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs...(1-3).

In the article 'Crossing the Abyss', Miriam Sivan reflects "More than in any of the Holocaust hauntings in Cynthia Ozick's fiction, it is the death of baby Magda and her mother Rosa's torpid and numbed reaction to it that most wrenchingly causes the reader to suffer the horrors of the Shoah". The extermination of hundreds of innocent people is definitely a wound in history. A massive community of doomed children were burned alive even before their parents. The catastrophic episode is framed in the most heart-wrenching manner in 'The Shawl'. The narrator explicates:

But the shoulder that carried Magda was not coming toward Rosa and the shawl, it was drifting away, the speck of Magda was moving more and more into the smoky distance. Above the shoulder a helmet glinted. The light tapped the helmet and sparkled it into a goblet. Below the helmet a black body like a domino and a pair of black boots hurled themselves in the direction of the electrified fence. The electric voices began to chatter wildly. "Maamaa, maaamaaa," they all hummed together (4).

Rosa metamorphoses into the defenseless, passive and vulnerable Jews who are forced to be mute and unresponsive to the atrocities of the Nazi regime. The fate of Rosa seeing her daughter burning before her is sketched as,

She only stood, because if she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda's body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf's screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot; so she took Magda's shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in...(4).

The individual grief of a Jewish mother recollected is part of a bigger picture of what Jan Assmann introduced as collective memory. Rosa represents the calamitous past of several innocent people. This past is made known to the next generation through various institutionalizations. Such institutionalized narratives act as postmemory. Individual trauma knowledge of Rosa is part of an extended landscape of what is called collective trauma. Jeffrey Alexander in his essay "Toward a Cultural Theory of Trauma" emphasises:

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.... (307).

Through the production of cultural trauma, social groups and national communities identify themselves with the source of human suffering and their existence. The construction of cultural trauma can be facilitated even through storytelling. Nevertheless, 'The Shawl' is a fictional account of a realistic event and it acts as a mnemonic site for remembering the past. The direful incidents and experiences of the past are recorded in the story and thus, it performs the role of an agent of postmemory. It crystallizes memory for future reference. The story preserves a traumatic memory which is shared among a community. Thus, it forms a historical source that transmits shared memories to generations to which they will also feel a sense of belonging and identity. The story is a commemorative site for even posterity to come.

Memory is manifested through various media. Literature plays an integral role in mediating memory. It is a medium of remembrance. In this context, literature is defined to be a mnemonic art. Society recollects its past through different forms of narratives. Memory and the act of recollection is a significant area of epistemological study in literature. Therefore, narratives in any form are an embodiment of social and cultural life. Multiple texts have portrayed the individual and collective process of remembering. The subjective act of remembrance is counted upon by social frameworks within which an individual is situated. Memories are not incoherent. It is presented in images, textbooks, statues, memorials and narratives. Memory is reinterpreted through these retrospective media. These forms represent collective memory as well as assimilate memory in a more socially recognizable manner. The theory of post-memory binds posterity to the personal, collective and cultural memory of the past, through varied sites of memory. Pictorial representations or narratives are carriers of post-memory that shape the identity of future generations.

Memory is the present of the past. It is largely subjective. An individual's memory of the past paves a path to live in the present and plan about the future. The memory of Rosa is a brief fictional rendition of a historical event. The account is undeniably a contribution to the genre of Holocaust literature. The work stands as a source for postmemory which the generation who were not a part of the traumatic events can even relate. The relevance of postmemory is that it keeps the memory alive in hopes of preventing or repeating history. 'The Shawl', with its banalizing of historical events, canonizes a memory to be commemorated for generations to come.

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