



Research Article

The Mutilated Body: The Representation of the Feminine Body in Female Holocaust Survivors' Memoirs

Liliane Steiner, Ph.D.✉

Principal Research Assistant, The Arnold and Leona Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research, Bar-Ilan University, Israel. Hemdat College of Education.

Abstract:

The female experience of the Holocaust delineates loss, de-feminization, and desecration of the feminine Jewish body. Abject and silence impose their conceptual framework on female Holocaust memoirists, resulting in a fragmentary representation that allows a partial glimpse into the (inner) past-experience of these female survivors. In a feminist act, these survivors settle scores with their perpetrators and subtly recount the story of the perpetual assault inflicted upon the Jewish feminine body during the Holocaust and, in many cases, during the post-war period. This study aims to stress the poetics of this writing, that I call the poetics of catastrophe.

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Introduction

"We expected a transport of women from Auschwitz, are you from Auschwitz? Were you sent instead of the women?"

We are from Auschwitz. And we are women.

A wave of disbelief ripples through the ranks of the assembled army personnel. Women? Our freshly shaven heads, gray prison garb, and sticklike bodies are not very convincing proof."

I have lived a thousand years, Livia Bitton- Jackson, 149

This startling depiction of the Jewish feminine body portrays the torture and torments that Jewish women were forced to endure at the hands of the Nazis and their perpetrators. Femininity and Jewish identity have been both assaulted and marred, leaving no external traces or physical traits to allude to a familiar physical past. Only the voice testifies to the gender, while Auschwitz testifies to the identity. In the universe of Auschwitz, the voice becomes the sole remaining marker. It bestows identity and restores the cognitive dissonance among the assembled army personnel. Turned as it were into a phallic silhouette, the Jewish feminine body relies on the voice that extends to the verbal assertion of life and testimony. Female Holocaust survivors' memoirs inscribe in their testimonial act not only the unique Jewish feminine experience in the Holocaust but also expand our knowledge of the Jewish female bodily experience (Ringleheim, 1985; Heinmann, 1986; Rosen, 1992; Ofer & Weitzman, 1998; Horowitz, 1998; Bigsby, 2006; Baumel Tydor, 1998; Herzog, 2008; Goldenberg, 1996; Baer & Goldenberg, 2003; Bos, 2003; Goldenberg & Shapiro, 2013; Cushman, 2020; Horowitz, 2020; Levitzky, 2020). These testimonies reveal the atrocities inflicted upon the Jewish feminine body. Inspired by racial ideology and by misogyny, the Nazis and their collaborators turned the Jewish feminine body into an arena of sadistic settling of scores with the Jewish people through the assault on the Jewish feminine body (Goldenberg & Shapira, 2013; Cushman, 2020; Horowitz, 2020). Regarded as a *no man land's* body, the Jewish feminine body bore and withstood the darkest sides of the Nazis' and their collaborators' male psyche. Kremer in *Women's Holocaust Writing, Memory and Imagination* (2000) mentions the SS soldiers' pornographic sadism as a strategy to dehumanize the women and make them realize their loss of autonomy (132). While the scholars mentioned above and many others focus on the feminine experience in the Holocaust per se, I want to focus in this essay on an aspect overlooked by scholars so far: the revenge encapsulated in the feminine writing and embedded in the testimonial act. The feminine writing of the female Holocaust survivors turns the narrative into an active and subversive narrative that challenges and defies the Nazi regime and ideology that dictated the Jewish feminine essence and fate as well as the content of the narrative—form and content conflate. The writing of the feminine experience in the Holocaust is an assertive and feminist act used to reconstruct a feminine Jewish reality and self. Having been maltreated, beaten, starved, abused, and considered as an abject/ object, the female Holocaust survivor rises from the ashes and writes her story as a subject, a free person who narrates her story from a perspective of agency and empowerment, as someone free and in control of her destiny. Writing and narrating redeem the subject. This standpoint evolves in two ways: feminine/ personal and feminine/ general. Both ways intertwine and re-enact the devastating impact of the Nazi ideology and decrees on the Jewish feminine lot. The collapse of the Nazi regime and its ideology, which claimed superiority

transcending all cultures, is vividly exposed as barbaric, inhuman, and fundamentally inferior. It is reflected in the feminine fragmented poetics through the representation of the feminine experience during the Holocaust and the representation of the feminine body. The female Holocaust survivors who have the courage and the inner strength to write about their experiences rebel and outcry against the atrocious experience they underwent at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. They relate the way they were debased and forced to defecate or pee, standing with their legs apart in public like animals, or standing for hours in roll calls at night for no apparent reason. This written shriek reverberates silent and silenced archaic feminine shrieks repressed in the attempt to survive, following the concentration camps' rule: "Do not cry. Be still if you want to live. (*The Cage*, 127) Through her writing act, the female Holocaust survivor becomes a diachronic narrator. This diachronic voice emerges from the abyss of the death camps and also tells the tragic, untold story of the dead and the silent victims. As Riva, Ruth Sender was told in the ghetto:

'Don't you ever, ever give up. There is a tomorrow for us! We will live to tell our story to the whole world. We must teach humanity what evil, hatred, and prejudice can do[...] So, you keep on writing and never stop being yourself.' I must continue. They have the right to know what happened while they were gone. They left me in charge. (*The Cage*, 77)

In a feminist act, these female survivors subtly recount the story of the perpetual assault inflicted upon the Jewish feminine body during the Holocaust and, in many cases, during the post-war period. The testimonial act transcends the premise and the promise of bearing witness and inscribes itself in a belated act of settling scores with the perpetrators. These women's writing that bears the scarring experience of the Holocaust transcribes history into her story embedded in poetical figures that fragment and deconstruct the Jewish feminine body and experience only to preserve the inner feminine Jewish self from the abject experience relived by the act of writing. I will focus on the poetics of her story, or more precisely, on the literary figures that embody the feminine experience in the Holocaust.

In this essay, I will underline the poetical detours that allow possibilities for distancing the debased and suffering self in the act of writing: concealment within 'we' when depicting painful experiences, digressions that fragment the narration to avoid being engulfed by harrowing and unbearable events, similes, etc. Women survivors use these techniques to depict their excruciating feminine experience without diminishing the violence and the degrees of misogynistic treatment inflicted upon them. These detours enable and support the act of putting into words the unnamable, forging what I call 'the poetics of catastrophe.'

Since the testimonial act implies a tremendous effort to relive the events and to put them into words, which are, *a priori*, an inadequate vehicle to bear the Holocaust witness' experiences, to quote Charlotte Delbo (*Days and Memory* (1985, 3-4), Zoe R. Waxman (*Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation*, 2008, 173) among others, the written representation of the Jewish feminine bodily experience is inevitably embedded in a unique topology of silence.

Jean-Francois Lyotard in *Le Differend* defines silence as "the unstable state and fleeting moment of language wherein something which must be capable of being put down into phrases cannot yet be. This state comprises silence, a negative phrase; nevertheless, it also calls to possible phrases in principle" (29). Lyotard continues and explains that the logic of these silences remains in their ability to substitute for phrases (30).

Years after the Holocaust, silenced words and phrases are uttered and written in a belated endeavor to bear witness to the experience in the Holocaust and take revenge on the Nazis by representing their experiences in the ghettos and concentration camps. They compose and recount the Jewish feminine Holocaust experience, as well as the feminine bodily experience, calling out to the negative. In their attempt to voice the unvoiced, female survivors have recourse, both to words and their opposite. Words and phrases help them purify the self from the abject, i.e., the atrocious Holocaust experience, since, as Kristeva points out in *Pouvoirs de L'Horreur* (30), "It is the verbal communication which discloses the abject." At the same time, she claims, "only the verb purifies from the abject" (ibid).

Moreover, verb and silence, the components commonly used in writing the abject experience of female Holocaust survivors, reflect the dialogic relationship with the abject Jewish women who were compelled to experience in the concentration camps. Abject words were hurled at Jewish women by their Nazi perpetrators (Bettleheim, 1979). They not only aimed at spreading terror but also at triggering an emotional and cognitive dissonance: "Hurry up! Swines!"; "Dirty cows"; "Whores" to name only a few. Against this daily onslaught of verbal abuse, the incarcerated Jewish women's sole possible response was silence. Abject words were used to demarcate Aryans from Jews and to set distinct boundaries between them. Through inculcating shame, such words were accompanied by the brutal and degrading treatment inflicted on their bodies, attacking both body and soul. In Auschwitz, silence became an instinctual survival strategy under the constant existential threat that hovered over the prisoners and the presence of death in every corner of the concentration camp. Jean-Francois Lyotard explains the negation of talking in menacing situations as a necessity (*Le Differend*, 26). Silence splits body and soul, and in the end, it might preserve the body and, eventually, the soul.

The abject words hurled at the Jewish women were meant to initiate them into the Planet of Auschwitz, the ultimate (planet of) abject death as defined by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. The Auschwitz equation, composed of abject things and silence, is re-enacted in the writing of the experience of the Jewish feminine body during the Holocaust, and documents the shock of thousands of Jewish women, turned overnight into abject human beings by the Nazis and their collaborators. Instinctual survival strategies are put at work in the asymmetrical power relationship: the suppression of feelings such as anger, fear, outrage, helplessness, and humiliation in a life-threatening situation until such a time that they can be expressed without jeopardizing one's chances of survival, or, in the words of Lyotard, feelings that, in some future time, "are called to possible phrases," in an attempt to avert the abject from taking hold of the surviving "I".

To this dialectical relationship with the abject, an additional issue is added to the representation of the Jewish feminine bodily experience, defined by Waxman in *Writing the Holocaust* (128) as "the appropriateness of experiences for publication." Waxman claims that testimonies of female survivors "are not spontaneous outbursts of information, but come from the careful representation of experience." Since the female experience of the Holocaust delineates loss, depersonalization, dehumanization, as well as de-feminization and desecration of the feminine Jewish body, writing Holocaust memories involves constant confrontation with the abject and its menace to engulf the subject. Being an act of freedom and revenge, the writing of the female survivors is loyal to the feminine "I," its urges and weaknesses rather than to literary conventions. Abject and silence impose their conceptual framework on female Holocaust memoirists, resulting

in a fragmentary representation that allows a partial glimpse into the (inner) experience of these female survivors.

Dismantlement of the Jewish feminine body

In this paper, the focus of the research is on the following memoirs: *From Ashes to Life*, by Lucille Eichengreen; *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, by Livia Bitton-Jackson; *Sisters in The Storm*, by Anna Eilenberg; *The Survivor in Us All*, by F. Erna Rubinstein, and *The Cage*, by Ruth Sender. All of them are less known and hardly or not enough discussed by scholars. They all depict their experience in the Holocaust and relate in detail their imprisonment in Auschwitz.

We can assume that the Nazi conceptualization of Jewish women was, by essence, metonymic. The Nazis perceived Jewish women as cell-bearers or child-bearers (Kremer, 2001, p. 2); as such, Jewish women constituted the Nazi fierce enemy (ibid). The Nazi metonymic conceptualization of Jewish women is re-enacted in the experience of Jewish women during the Holocaust, as well as in its representation.

Female Holocaust memoirists render in their narration of the Jewish feminine body the way the Nazis initially perceived it. In other words, in the accounts written by female survivors, the Jewish feminine body is, by definition, depicted as disfigured and deformed, even though the descriptions relate stages before their actual deformation at the hands of the Nazis.

The dismantlement of the feminine body at those early stages of the hellish Holocaust experience is permeated with later nightmarish experiences. Ruth Sender in *The Cage* depicts their initiation into Auschwitz:

We are pushed forward toward the unknown by whips whistling in the air, their sharp blows landing on the heads and shoulders of the women. Outcries of pain echo all around us. (150)

The beaten parts, the heads, and the shoulders blur the feminine body and represent it. The pain fragments the whole Jewish body and dismantles it. The characterization of Jewish women in female Holocaust survivors' memoirs bears the ongoing presence of trauma experienced by them in the ghettos and the concentration camps. Waxman, in *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, testimony, representation* (2008:153), notes that "the concept of [the] Holocaust acts as an organizer of memory, not only for events contained within its description, [but also] how it shapes, what it includes, and the manner of its functioning (...)". Self-articulation and representation are often conflated.

Ruth Sender's description provides a collective account of anonymous Jewish women living under the shock of Nazi brutality in Auschwitz, focusing on the very body parts that were targeted by the Nazis and utilized by them to break their souls, as well as their bodies. These anonymous Jewish women are also represented by their voices and outcries of pain. Though the narrator is part of the event being depicted, "We are pushed forward toward the unknown," the beatings refer only to the other women, differentiating the narrator from the mass of women who were brutally beaten. As an eyewitness, Ruth Sender joins the women later when she evokes the outcries that surround them. The narrator was spared the beatings, or perhaps this differentiation displays a kind of detachment or concealment behind the mass. The outcries of pain that fill the air and

the souls cannot be denied or repressed. They resonate in the minds of the survivors, and they are voiced by a belated expression in a belated written act of revenge.

Moreover, the metonymic representation of the Jewish female body is imposed on the memoirists by the Nazis, who hoarded every Jewish possession. Sender depicts the piles of Jewish women's possessions taken away violently of them. She uses the metaphor of "mountains of hair" to convey the tragedy experienced by thousands of Jewish female victims who were forcibly deprived of their femininity, now gathered in amorphous piles of hair; the mass murder of thousands of Jewish women embodied in the agglomeration of thousands of individuals' hair which leaves no doubt as to the fate of the newcomers in Auschwitz. The silent presence of shaven Jewish hair accumulated in abject piles was engraved in the victims' consciousness, resigning them in Auschwitz to abnegation and surrender. Later on, this sight would forge the narrator's paradigms of memory.

There are mountains of hair all around us: blond, brown, black. Piles of shoes, clothing, and eyeglasses surround us, each pile growing bigger and bigger with each passing row of new arrivals. (Sender, 152).

Piles of hair, together with piles of belongings, tell the terrible experience and fate of Jewish women caught in the Nazi labyrinth. The metonymic bias highlights the dismantlement of the Jewish female body as part of the psychological torment the Nazis inflicted upon the captive Jewish women. In the same movement, it enables the shrieking metonymic presence of the absent Jewish female bodies, the owners of the piled hair and belongings. Presence and absence are interwoven and recount in a shrieking silence the abject treatment inflicted upon Jewish women in Auschwitz. The metaphor of the mountains of hair also appears in Lucille Eichengreen's memoir, *From Ashes to Life* (1994, 88): "The room was filled with mountains of hair, blond, brown, and black curly, wavy, and straight."

Only the color of the hair testifies to the former potential owner's still bearing its individual characteristics and past life as a free person. The different hair colors also bear witness to the selection that sent older Jewish women (with gray hair) to their deaths.

Deprived of any individual characteristic, the Jewish women are regarded by the Nazis as abject bodies, doomed to be public shapeless bodies. Consequently, they are described by the survivors as such, blurring in the Nazi macabre analogy of living and dead bodies. In the hellish atmosphere of Auschwitz, the sole differentiation between the bodies will be to determine whether or not they had crossed the line of the ultimate abject, death. Note that the objectification that Jewish women went through in the Holocaust is reflected in the binary representation of the Jewish female body, which imparts the estrangement of the private Jewish feminine body.

They count the standing bodies again and again. They count the dead bodies on the ground. The count goes on for hours and hours. It is a cruel game they play to see who can last longer. Is this their amusement? Are we their playthings? (*The Cage*, 154)

Standing bodies and dead bodies on the ground are counted and are treated alike. Ruth Sender conveys the cruelty of the treatment they received by rendering in the representation of the roll-call the Nazi amalgam, embodied in the analogy of living and dead bodies. This amalgam obliterates both the Jewish feminine body and its identity and restricts space and movement as

well. Hence, by taking deconstructing patterns of life and molding (temporary) life in the concentration camps into the shape of inertia, the Nazis reconstructed new Holocaust patterns of (imminent) death within the realms of life. They obliterated the boundaries between life and death, turning life into a living death. Jewish women were metamorphosed not only into abject but also into naked, shapeless, inert bodies, projecting them into the ultimate goal of dead bodies. Erna F. Rubinstein also uses this analogy in her memoir, *The Survivor in Us All* (1993, 132). "On that march, however, we were all dead. A mass of dead bodies marched somewhere to the tune of the SS men's boots. The Nazi strategy is rendered in the metaphorical analogy.

Nevertheless, the Nazi strategy was thwarted by the incarcerated Jewish women's spirits. Though their bodies were metamorphosed and restricted to constricted spaces, their spirits were beyond restrictions and confinements. The Jewish women's resistance is starkly contrasted with the inert bodies. Ruth Sender juxtaposes the two elements of the Nazi extermination equation: the Nazi strategies versus the incarcerated Jewish women. Though the Jewish women could not react out of fear, their minds were free and sharp. "Is it some sort of cruel game they are playing to see who can last longer? Is this their amusement? Are we their playthings?" The forced, the movement of thought doubles restricted bodily movement, the freedom of the spirit. The Jewish feminine and critical mind questions the Nazis' strategies and derides the display of their power. The belated resistance is put into words. It dismantles not only the strategies but also the ultimate Nazi goal. The abject Jewish women turned into objects (playthings) resist the Nazis against all odds by remaining (critical) thinking subjects. They undermine the Nazis' might and dismantle it by the power and the freedom of their thinking. The dismantled Jewish feminine body is governed by a resistant Jewish mind that disassembles the oppressors' power and mocks it with the power of thought.

Still, the representation of the metamorphosed Jewish women is burdened by the brutal bodily experience that incarcerated Jewish women went through and is molded according to the extreme, shapeless form, or more precisely, "uni-form", to use Sandra Gilbert's term (1980, 391-417).

On most decks lie five shriveled bodies with hungry, horror-stricken eyes. Some bunks are not filled yet. (Sender, 1980: 122)

The shock, as well as the feeling of estrangement that Riva feels in Auschwitz, is reflected in the depiction of the Jewish women she encounters in the block. She is blatantly confronted with the face of death and the outcome of the misogynistic treatment these women underwent. The hungry, horror-stricken eyes, though silent, transgress the realms of their anatomical function only to impart the horrors they endured. The metonymic description of these destitute women makes up the transcripts in Lyotard's *Le Différend* (*The Differend*, 30): The presence of hunger and horror in the eyes of the inmates underscores the urge of telling the distress to the "newcomers," coupled with their inability to do so verbally. Hunger, horror, and the (heavy) silence- the lack of speech, conflate and allude to the unspeakable. The belated witness tells the postponed and silenced story- yet to be written- of these women. Years after the Holocaust, Ruth Sender, like other survivors, tells the ineffable.

In Livia Jackson-Bitton's *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, the eyes of the incarcerated Jewish women are beyond any expression. The narrator's first encounter with them reflects not only the

estrangement she feels at the startling sight of these women, but also the accumulation of atrocities the latter went through and their impact on their souls. The gaze of the narrator posed upon these women dismembers the Jewish feminine body and fragments it: head, eyes (or more precisely, stares). The "fresh" gaze of the new arrivals catches the immensity of their distress frozen in the women's appearance. "Shorn heads. Gray dresses. [...] Blank stares. The blank stares of the insane [...]. Impersonal." The incarcerated women are fragmentarily caught by the new prisoners' gaze; each body fragment reinforces the horrible impression of the catastrophe. First, the heads are caught, then the dresses, and finally the eyes. This minimalist depiction delineates and renders not only the intensity of abuse and violence the incarcerated Jewish women experienced but also the shock of the new prisoners at the sight of these women. The terrified, silent eyes tell the trauma of the misogynistic treatment these women went through.

Minimalism and fragmentation are interwoven in the representation of the Jewish women in the concentration camps. These literary figures conflate and crystallize Lyotard's *Le Différend* economy. The minimalist style used to depict the incarcerated Jewish women bears witness to the minimal conditions and space they were reduced to. This writing style joins the non-phrased torments embedded in the fragmentary representation of Jewish women. They are encoded in the substitutes of words, the silenced words or the unvoiced words alluded to in the very substitutes of words. Where words fail to vehicle the hellish world of Auschwitz, poetics is called in. The logic of substitution is applied: words for silence, fragments for wholes, symbols for atrocious feminine experiences, cubist technique for the defeminization and depersonalization that Jewish women were subjected to by the Nazis. Shorn heads represent the violent misogynic journey of thousands of Jewish women; their gray dresses, which stand for the women, embed the misogynic metamorphosis these women went through- from free Jewish feminine subjects, they were turned overnight into abject defeminized objects. The fragmented gaze fixed upon the women dismantles the tormented Jewish feminine body. It renders a distorted 'cubist' Jewish feminine Holocaust figure made of a shorn head, a gray dress, and vacant eyes. The metonymic description of the women: "Gray dresses," resonates with the homogenization they were subjected to at the hands of the Nazis and is echoed in the adjective: "Impersonal." This fragmented visual perception renders the shock of the terrifying sight with which the new prisoners were confronted upon their arrival at Auschwitz, as well as their inability to comprehend what was in store for them. The fragmented perception of these Jewish women not only creates a new dimension but also allows the shift in the newcomers' perception of the cruel reality in Auschwitz, leaving no doubt about their own fate.

Shaving of hair

The traumatic misogynic experience of shaving of hair is related in various ways in female survivors' memoirs. The variety of representations reflects the different ways the survivors deal with this attack of femininity. Regardless of the treatment this experience is given in the memoirs, the main elements compose this scene: the brutal attack of the hair and body hair, the trauma that accompanies this experience, and the shock of recognition that follows the shaving of hair. All these converge to render the Auschwitz archetypical Jewish female experience. The more we read about this misogynistic experience, the more our knowledge on this topic broadens and grows. Nevertheless, diversity characterizes the ways the female survivors cope with this experience and represent it. It ranges from a relatively short description to a lengthy, detailed

treatment. This diversity emphasizes the profound, incurable feminine wound inflicted upon Jewish femininity.

In *The Cage*, Ruth Sender refers relatively very briefly to the experience of shaving hair. She detaches herself from it and conceals it behind the mass description:

My head is shaven by a woman in striped prison clothes. 'This is to keep the lice out of your hair', she says sarcastically, while cutting into my long brown hair with her shaver. I stare at her without really seeing her. (152)

In these four short sentences, trauma is condensed. Though we recognize the archetype of the experience of the shaving of hair, the individual misogynic experience is recounted in a very particular way. First, the reference to the body part: "My head is shaven", instead of my hair is shaven, as found in many other female survivors' memoirs, alludes to the further misogynic treatment of other feminine bodily parts silenced by post-war feminine dignity. Secondly, in Sender's description, the focus moves to the woman in striped prison clothes who assaults her with her shaver. Sender stresses the fact that sadistic female prisoners are the authors of the assault on Jewish femininity. Undermining in a typical 'Auschwitz manner' the master-slave dialectic, this description reveals the monstrous Nazi logic in using prisoners to carry out the crimes against the Jews, creating in that way a sadistic sub-dialectic: slave master-slave, a well-known Nazi strategy.

Livia Bitton-Jackson, in *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, provides the readers with lengthy details. She describes the terror before the shaving of women's hair and focuses on the pubertal girl's embarrassment when the SS men ordered the Jewish female prisoners to get undressed.

I hesitate before removing my bra. My breasts are two growing buds, taut and sensitive. I can't have anyone see them. I decide to leave my bra on. Just then, a shot rings out. The charge is ear-shattering. Several women begin to scream. Others weep. I quickly take my bra off. (77)

Two different worlds are juxtaposed one against the other in this description which sheds light on the young girls' feminine experience in the concentration camps and voices the feelings that pertain to normalcy, while in the same movement, the quick transition of the female prisoners to the Nazi universe is rendered.

Bitton-Jackson depicts in detail the shaving of hair. Contrary to Sender, she supplies the reader with the full background information about the shaving of body hair, though the term body hair covers implicitly all the parts deliberately mentioned. "[...] several young women in gray dresses start shaving our hair— on our heads, under our arms, and in the pubic area" (ibid). Later on, Bitton-Jackson focuses on the head, silencing the violent experience of having the other intimate body parts shaved. This elliptical depiction interweaves with the typical adolescent's embarrassment conveyed previously, as well as with the economy of the writing of trauma (Levine, 2006, 110). Far from being less debasing, the experience of shaving of hair impacts the body and the soul. Bitton-Jackson mourns her golden hair violently being attacked by the "husky, indifferent hair butcher" (77-78). The binary metaphor used to render the terrible experience stresses in the same movement the brutality of the slaughter of hair, as well as the effect on the victims' souls. It also insinuates the Nazis' initial attitude toward the victims. Knowing that butchers slaughter only

animals, the metaphor: 'butcher of hair' blurs boundaries between humans and animals, and renders by this the unique atmosphere of the planet of Auschwitz.

My long, thick braids remain attached while the shaving machine shears my scalp. The pain of the heavy braid tugging mercilessly at the yet unshaven roots brings tears to my eyes. (77)

This brutal attack on femininity leads to an extraordinary response or, more exactly, to a narrative that redeems the wounded self. In a belated *tour de force* that turns the abject Jewish feminine body into a body that celebrates its nudity, as well as its non-feminine shape, the hairless naked body liberates itself from the burden of femininity. Bitton-Jackson reconstructs the harrowing experience in a post-structuralist way. The aggressed, humiliated, metamorphosed Jewish feminine body leads surprisingly in the post-war recounts to the conundrum of individuality. Bitton-Jackson juxtaposes two scenes: a. the typical Auschwitz misogynic homogenization of Jewish women-

The absence of hair transforms individual women into like-bodies. Age melts away. Other differences melt away. Facial expressions disappear. In their place, a blank, senseless stare emerges on the thousand faces of one naked, unappealing body. (78)

The reconstruction of the Auschwitz abject scene of shaving of hair echoes the main liberating ideas stated in Judith Butler's book¹ regarding gender. Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's theory, according to which one is not born a woman, one becomes one, Judith Butler builds her theory by declaring that gender is performative, "a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration." Bitton-Jackson dismantles the feminine mystique embodied in the pre-war Jewish feminine body and frees it from the long-term burden that culture has set on it over the years. The use of a macabre setting for liberating women from the burden of femininity stems from an act of rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Jewish feminine subject.

The shaving of hair has another curious effect. A burden is lifted. The burden of individuality. The burden of associations. Of identity. The burden of the recent past. (78)

In this *tour de force*, Bitton-Jackson also deconstructs the Nazis' plan regarding the Jewish women: from the abject, hideous object the Nazis turned them into, the prisoners profiled through a post-war narration become a subversive mass subject that thwarts the enemy's plot of defeminization, humiliation and dismantlement of the Jewish women's status and dignity². In a surge of settling of scores with the Nazis, in the narrating act, Bitton-Jackson represents the abject Jewish feminine body as a body that speaks for itself and rejects not only the violence inflicted upon it but also abolishes the beauty myth. The transformation of the Jewish feminine body into an "unappealing body" (78) transpires to 'bode well' for the Jewish female prisoner; freed from the burden of passivity which their feminine body and culture had dictated for centuries, they react proactively and concentrate on survival.

¹ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990, p.xv

² Livia Bitton-Jackson's mother is represented as not having been disfigured by the shaving of hair. On the contrary, her beauty is resplendent: "with all accessories gone, her perfect features are even more striking. Her high forehead, large blue eyes, classic nose, shapely lips, and elegant cheekbones are more evident than ever" (p.79).

This subversive idea in the context of Auschwitz is stated in the chapter "Born in the Showers," in the memoir, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*. In this chapter, the post-war narrator breaks paradigms of thinking regarding the shaving of hair experience and the Jewish feminine response to it. Note, the chapter's title, "Born in the showers," in the context of the Holocaust stands in stark contrast to the gas chambers known too as showers where millions of Jews were gassed.

The chapter starts: "Newborn creatures, we marched out of the showers. Shorn and stripped, showered and uniformed we marched" (81). Bitton-Jackson renders in a very special way the feeling of estrangement that Jewish women felt in Auschwitz after the assault against their femininity. The terminology utilized to convey this feeling: "newborn" (creatures) shocks the reader and sets a cognitive dissonance that, by its very estrangement, draws the reader into Auschwitz. The lengthy depiction of the march from the showers to the camps is strewn over by the anaphora, 'we march'. The repetition of the verb *march* resounds in the treads of the Jewish female prisoners, as well as their determination to survive, as stated by Bitton-Jackson: "We were new creatures. Marching expertly in fives at a rapid, deliberate rhythm; we were an army of robots animated by the hysterics of survival" (ibid). The survival strategy displayed by the Jewish women attests to the change in character these women went through shortly after they arrived at Auschwitz. Bitton-Jackson portrays strong Jewish women who defy their gender, as well as their Nazi perpetrators by taking matters into their own hands as much as possible, all to survive.

Two levels of behavior (obeying orders and defiance) portrayed in, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, are found in other female survivors' narratives. In the memoir, *From Ashes to Life*, Lucille Eichengreen recalls:

The kapo next to her pulled my long, brown hair upward and proceeded to shave, running the clippers from the nape of my neck to the top of my head. As she shaved my armpits and all the other body hair, I concentrated on my hatred: hatred for her, hatred for the Germans who had reduced me to this sweating, naked creature, without hair, without dignity; I was no longer a human being to them, just an expendable Jew.

The split between the body and the inner spirit is stressed by the detachment, as well as the demarcation between the Germans and their wrongs and the Jewish feminine spirit. The narrator differentiates herself from the abject 'creature' the Germans turned her into by stressing the fact that she "was no longer a human being to them"(93-94), but not to herself. The abject state does not erase the Jewish feminine self. On the contrary, in a paradoxical logic the Jewish feminine, violated body conforms to violence, but this very violence gives vent to anger and defiance that stimulate survival and, later, gives rise to the urge to revenge and tell the world about the brutal assault of femininity and inscribe it in a special poetics adjusted to the narrator's needs and postwar choices.

The shock of recognition

The shaving of hair and the brutal treatment the feminine Jewish body underwent in the concentration camps entailed a double shock: the shock of the brutalization and the shock of recognition. As a matter of fact, the regard they had for the other brutalized Jewish women, their coreligionists, redefines the self and defines the body as abject. Under the shock of the violated body, the defeminized women could not figure out the extent of the damage inflicted on their

own bodies until they were confronted with their inmates' appearance and reactions. No longer capable of bearing the individual identity, the brutalized Jewish feminine body resorts to the horrified regard of the other that reflects the extent of the atrocity.

The cold spray helps to bring me out of my stupor I have been in. I look at my friends, at their shaven heads, at their horror-filled eyes. (Sender, 152)

The sight of the others mirrors their bodily experience, leaving no doubt about the consequences of the brutal assault on the Jewish feminine body; the experience and the result are joined by the other's conscience and rendered first by silent horrified eyes. The bodily estrangement brings about a cognitive dissonance, as well as new insights into the upcoming Jewish feminine experience in the concentration camps: depersonalization and homogenization. Deprived of their individual identifying features, the Jewish women are left suddenly with their naked bodies, cast in anonymity and homogeneity in a mass of uni-form female bodies. The recognition passes also through the voice, the only asset left to retrace the stolen past.

I grab Karol's hand. 'Karola, is that you?', I whisper. We stare at each other for a long moment. 'Is that you, Riva? Is that you?' She gasps, transfixed by the sight of my shaven head" (Sender, 152).

Note, the shock of recognition is represented in a 'positive' way in Bitton-Jackson's "*I Have Lived a Thousand Years*." The shaving of hair proves to be a blessing for the narrator, who was rejected by her mother who preferred her brother, Bubi, over her. The mother, who doesn't recognize her daughter at first, catches the narrator's resemblance to her brother for the first time. "You look just like Bubi. Strange, I've never seen the resemblance before" (79). The analogy with the brother made through the shaven head of the narrator blurs the long-term discordance between the two and ameliorates the mother-daughter relationship.

Language failing to bear the atrocities, the unprecedented non-human brutality³ on the Jewish female body carried out by the Nazis is embodied in the use of metaphors taken from the animal world, as opposed to the human world. Note, Jews were considered as sub-humans and referred to as animal-like by the Nazis and their collaborators. Wendy Lower, in *Hitler's Furies*, recounts that a female journalist reported on a student who wrote home "that the streets (of the Lodz Ghetto) and the squares swarm with Jews roaming around, many of them criminal types. What are we to do with vermin?" (p. 84). Lower mentions that "descriptions of the landscape as barren and the inhabitants as animal-like or even invisible were typical of German colonialist rhetoric in letters of the time and would persist in memoirs penned decades later." (*Hitler's Furies*, see p.77). The bodily metamorphosis that the Jewish female prisoners went through is rendered by the metaphor of monkeys. The narrator in *Sisters in the Storm* (1991) relates:

I'm in a world of monkeys, I thought with disbelief. For a moment I couldn't make out the connection between me and the little monkey boy standing next to me, [who] anxiously peered in my face. It was only when the little creature burst into tears that I recognized Sarah. (p. 142)

³ The Holocaust historian, Yehuda Bauer, quoted in Lower's *Hitler's Furies* (p.158-159), refutes the use of the terms *bestly* and *bestiality* applied to the Nazis, since it is "an insult to the animal kingdom...because animals do not do things like that; the behavior of the perpetrators was all too human, not inhuman."

Knowing that monkeys are hairy, the use of this metaphor fails to depict the actual physical metamorphosis the Jewish women went through. However, through the leap between language and referent, this description renders the shock of being shaved publicly and stripped of clothing and valuables in the most debasing way⁴. It imparts the feeling of being ugly, defeminized, dehumanized, and homogenized. Blurring the individual level of every Jewish female prisoner, the narrator utilizes the same device her perpetrators used against her and the other Jewish women, referring to all the girls and women as a (repugnant) mass. She reduces them to monkeys, ugly creatures. The variety of metaphors: frightened birds, monkeys, mice⁵, creatures, etc. reflects the individual sentiment and estrangement that sustains the particularity of the voice and her personality amid the mass. Young E. James stresses that "the language and metaphors by which we come to events tell us as much about how events have been grasped and organized, as they do about events themselves"(Young, 1988, 91). The shock of recognition, together with the aftermath of the feminine experience of the Holocaust, is written in a mode that helps the narrators avoid the atrocious reality of their past experiences. Jose Ortega, cited in Young E. James, regards metaphors as a frame for difficult concepts and reality (ibid, 90). When dealing with the monstrous reality of the Holocaust, or rather irreality, Ortega's definition of metaphor, "the avoidance of reality", supports the attempt of survivors to put into words the reality beyond the reality of their hellish past and, by the same token, to protect the post-war self from being engulfed by it. The use of metaphors in the memoirs of female survivors constitutes also a means of detachment, a subtle way to deliberately put back once again the wounded self in the hellish reality of Auschwitz, without being really there. In the context of the Holocaust, the metaphor in the resourceful use of the female survivors serves rather as the avoidance of abject by setting an aesthetic "distance" between the debased "I" in the concentration camps and the post-war narrator. Since the past has never really passed away for the survivors, writing about the Holocaust can be done only by means of Paul Ricoeur's "calculated error (ibid)". Ricoeur's calculated error consists of "taking deliberately one thing for another." The various figures of speech, namely metaphors, and metonymy used by female Holocaust survivors, are an attempt and a modality of representing in words the unrepresentable. "Animals" instead of post-war survivors' recovering selves, "mass" instead of individuals, "gray dresses" (metonymy) instead of decent Jewish women entrapped in the Nazis' inferno. Being unable to recognize the abject self, both in their past experiences and their post-war memories, the female survivor's subject rejects their past and

⁴ Erna F. Rubinstein, in *The Survivor in us All*, depicts in a metonymic way her state of mind after the terrible experience of her initiation at Auschwitz. She dismantles her body into "inside" and "outside" parts, blending feelings with the physical parts: "The fire did not consume us physically, yet something had happened to me. I felt as if the whole inside of my body was taken out and the remainder- that is, the outer body, the legs and the eyes- were marching on-" (p.143). Legs and eyes become existential body parts and constitute the grotesque Jewish feminine body in Auschwitz that struggles to survive, while bearing the burden of the diminishing experience in the camps. These parts assure body movement and, consequently, bodily existence and survival. The cubist representation of the feminine body conveys the deformation of the feminine body in the feminine sadistic Auschwitz experience, as well as the anamorphic inner feminine perception of the bodily experience imbued by emotional and physical pain.

⁵ "The mice are caught" in this metaphor that serves also as the title of chapter one. Anna Eilenberg depicts in *Sisters in the Storm* the frightened Jews as trapped animals, running helpless inside cages and closed walls. Nevertheless, some of the metaphors using animals represent the Jews' resourcefulness in escaping the many traps. "We had been playing mouse and cats lately. When an *aktion* approaches our neighborhood, we would flee to an area where the *aktions* had already taken place". (*Sisters in the storm*, p. 129).

present artifact and abject self. In a belated burst of writing, they reject the Nazis' aberrant attribution of their being abject, refusing to recognize the abject, debased, defeminized self as theirs. Paul Ricoeur's calculated error fits the *parti pris* of female Holocaust survivors. The shock of recognition of the debased female Jewish self still resonates after all these years and refuses to subside. The *detour* used in their narration helps them to break away from the past reality and distance themselves from the never-ending flow of pain. The indirect representation of the abject self and body through the metaphor and other figures of speech constitutes a subtle way of silencing the abject self and body in the feminine Holocaust experience. By the dint of evasions of language, the narrator positions herself in the hiatus that separates her from the abject. In a paradoxical logic, the self that strives hard to bear witness and to testify about the atrocities it went through in the Holocaust, silences the unbearable only to represent it in a distancing way to preserve Jewish feminine self-dignity. Represented systematically as other, the abject Jewish feminine self declares that *I* is other (animal = not I, abject = not I), and refutes the (past) abject self.

Conclusion

The representation of the feminine body in female Holocaust survivors' narratives bears the binary mode that characterizes the belated act of witnessing the horrendous feminine Holocaust experiences. In the paradoxical logic of expressing and silencing painful past memories, the narrating act betrays the violated Jewish feminine body.

Despite the attempt to rehabilitate the violated body and the dignity of Jewish women by silencing violent and disruptive bodily memories, evasions of language otherwise utilized to represent the experience of the violated body render – albeit in a fragmented way – the unrepresentable and the unnamable.

The Jewish feminine bodily experience represented in the memoirs of Jewish female Holocaust survivors represents the unbearable dehumanizing violence inflicted upon the Jewish feminine body by the dint of a flagrant violation of the usage of language and its narration, and the very pact of witnessing silenced past experiences. Where words are expected, silence sets in and violates the narrative flow, disrupting its articulation.

Nonetheless, when words are used, they represent the perpetrators' violence, making it present not only in the act of witnessing but also in the act of expression and language used. In a paradoxical logic drawn from a never-ending flow of pain, the metaphors in the memoirs of Jewish female survivors are the referents of the silenced Auschwitz catastrophe. They are positioned in relation to infernal past experiences that suffer from being silenced by the catastrophe and which cannot be voiced otherwise because of the catastrophe.

The narrators' memoirs echo the perpetrators' violence in a way that betrays the violated Jewish feminine body. Distancing the wounded self from the past reality, and lacking appropriate words to depict the unspeakable, the narration of the Jewish feminine experience in the Holocaust inscribes the Nazis' violence in mere metaphors of catastrophe. The survivors' narrative trespasses the boundaries of species and re-enacts in its narration the violence forced upon the Jewish feminine body and soul it wanted to silence.

The metaphors of animals, as also the homogenization and the cubist representation of the Jewish feminine body utilized to represent the violence inflicted upon the Jewish feminine body and soul, re-enact the Nazis' perception and terminology about the Jews in an attempt to be accurate regarding the referent of catastrophe while distancing the narrating self from it. The metaphors, that break the conventional relations between two categories: Jewish women and their referent, on the one hand, and the Jewish feminine self in the Holocaust, on the other, mark the visibility of the Nazi violence and thus establish a three-dimensional metaphor: the Jewish feminine *I* in the Holocaust, the Nazi violence and the Jewish self.

The anomaly inscribed in the metaphor of catastrophe, as well as in the subversive approach of language, renders the abuse and the artifact inflicted upon the Jewish women by the Nazis and their collaborators. In the same movement, they underscore the narrators' independence of mind. The way it is inscribed to bear witness to the Nazi violence and atrocities reminds us of Philomela's tapestry that tells her story of being raped by King Tereus. Since Philomela's tongue was cut off by her assailant to keep her silent, she uses her wits and the other parts of her body to let her sister Procne know about the crime. The message woven in the tapestry reaches its destination and breaks the silence. Similarly, the representation of the body in female Holocaust survivors' narratives becomes the signature- the mark of their defiance, as well as their poetical ruse to protect the feminine self. The metaphors, the homogenization, and the cubist representation of the body in the female survivors' narratives become a 'philomelic' mode of expression that enables a feminine discourse based on a unique code embedded in the literary figures (Steiner, 2014, 329-339). These poetical figures are more than rhetorical devices. They mirror a feminine hidden message embedded in the code of the feminine writing that settles scores with the Nazis and exposes their sub-human cruelty, disclosing their inferiority in a reversal equation. The survivors' narratives subvert the order and accuse their perpetrators of being the real sub-humans in the Holocaust. Rising from ashes to life the survivors prove not only their independence of mind but also their essential autonomy.

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