



Peer-Reviewed Journal

# Gendered Memory in Holocaust Fiction: A Close Reading of *The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick

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## Article Info

Received: 23 Mar 2025,

Received in revised form: 25 Apr 2025,

Accepted: 30 Apr 2025,

Available online: 07 May 2025

**Keywords—** Holocaust literature, gendered memory, maternal trauma, Cynthia Ozick, feminist literary criticism, post memory

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## Abstract

This paper examines the representation of gendered memory in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, a short but emotionally potent narrative set against the backdrop of the Holocaust. Using a feminist literary lens and memory studies, this research explores how Ozick articulates the fragmented and embodied memories of female trauma, particularly through the character of Rosa. The paper argues that Ozick's portrayal of maternal loss, physical vulnerability, and psychic dislocation not only underscores the specific suffering of women during the Holocaust but also resists the historical erasure of female perspectives in Holocaust narratives. A close reading reveals how symbolic objects like the shawl serve as vessels of both trauma and remembrance. This analysis contributes to ongoing discussions of Holocaust literature by highlighting how gender shapes memory formation, transmission, and expression.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature on the Holocaust has traditionally emphasised survival, loss, and moral reckoning. However, the question of how gender influences the experience and narration of Holocaust trauma has gained prominence only in recent decades. In this context, Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* emerges as a powerful text that not only depicts the horrors of concentration camps but also foregrounds female experience and memory. Through the protagonist Rosa, Ozick dramatizes a uniquely maternal response to atrocity, centered on loss, silence, and bodily memory. This paper explores the central research question: How does Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* construct gendered memory through narrative form, symbolism, and character psychology? Drawing upon feminist theory and trauma studies, this close reading contends

that the novella provides a gender-specific mode of remembering and witnessing Holocaust trauma. Although existing scholarship explores themes of trauma and symbolism in *The Shawl*, few studies focus on how Ozick constructs memory through a distinctly gendered and maternal lens—an area this paper seeks to address.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Holocaust studies have long centered on themes of trauma, testimony, and ethics. Foundational works such as Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies* (1991) argue that traditional narrative frameworks often fail to represent Holocaust experiences. Meanwhile, Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post memory" has helped scholars understand how trauma is

transmitted across generations, particularly through women. Feminist scholars like Shoshana Felman and Sara Horowitz have further interrogated the gendered dimensions of Holocaust writing, arguing that women's voices have been historically marginalized or depoliticised in survivor literature. Studies specifically on Ozick often focus on her Jewish

identity or metaphysical themes, but fewer have examined *The Shawl* through the lens of gendered memory. This paper seeks to fill that gap by situating Ozick's work at the intersection of Holocaust fiction, memory studies, and feminist literary analysis.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in literary analysis, with a specific focus on close reading techniques. The research employs feminist literary criticism and trauma theory as interpretive frameworks to examine *The Shawl*. Through textual analysis of the novella's language, symbolism, and narrative structure, the paper uncovers how memory is gendered and embodied. Primary analysis centers on Rosa's psychological and physical experiences, while secondary sources offer theoretical grounding in Holocaust memory and gender studies.

#### Close Reading and Analysis Embodied Memory and Trauma

Rosa's body becomes a site of trauma: "Her nipples were sore and cracked... she had no milk." The shawl as an object of bodily memory: protection, nourishment, and ultimately loss. The trauma of losing Magda is not only mental but physical, embedded in Rosa's senses.

#### Maternal Grief and Silenced Mourning

Rosa is denied mourning: she cannot scream, grieve, or protect. Quote: "She could not let out a scream. It was in her throat, stopped." The silencing is both literal (a survival strategy) and symbolic (women's grief in Holocaust memory).

#### The Symbol of the Shawl

The shawl serves as a layered symbol: security, silence, containment, and memory. It aligns with mnemonic objects in trauma theory, showing how survivors cling to physical items to

hold memory.

#### Temporal Disjunction and Memory Fracture

The narrative's shifts in time mirror Rosa's fractured memory. Flashbacks reflect

post-traumatic stress and memory disorientation, depicting how trauma interrupts linear recollection.

### IV. DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals how *The Shawl* challenges conventional historical narratives of the Holocaust by foregrounding individual, gendered memory. Ozick uses minimalistic prose and symbolic imagery to underscore the internal world of Rosa, whose trauma remains largely unspoken yet deeply felt. The story illustrates the unique psychological burden carried by women, especially mothers, who experience the Holocaust not only as victims of genocide but also as caretakers, mourners, and memory bearers. Furthermore, the use of the shawl as a symbolic artifact aligns with Hirsch's notion of postmemory—where trauma is communicated and preserved through objects and fragmented stories. This contributes to feminist efforts to recover suppressed narratives and reinterpret historical trauma through a gender-conscious lens.

### V. CONCLUSION

Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* offers a visceral and intimate portrayal of how Holocaust trauma is encoded through female embodiment and maternal memory. The novella's sparse language and potent symbolism allow for a reading that highlights the specific ways women remember and grieve in silence. By foregrounding a gendered lens, this paper adds to the understanding of how memory operates differently across identities within Holocaust literature. Ultimately, Ozick's story insists on the importance of private, affective memory in countering historical erasure, offering readers a haunting yet necessary window into the female experience of atrocity.

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