
Gender and Genocide in the Peripheral and Stereotypical Representation of Women in Popular Holocaust Films

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Abstract

Regarding the Holocaust women have always been “the silenced gender”. Women’s experiences are silenced in mainstream Holocaust representation as Professor Ronit Lentin claims that there is a “deafening silence” that “envelops the link between gender and genocide in relation to the Shoah”. Gender as Judith Butler points out is a reiterated social performance. There is a consensus that the study of women and the Holocaust is organised upon preconceived gender roles and the memory of the Holocaust structures its images upon a rigid gender stereotyping which gets perpetuated in the representation of women in popular Holocaust films. There is a monolithic representation of women based on the universal binary paradigm of powerful men and powerless women, how the male protagonist as a saviour has been accentuated and women characters have often been relegated to the border of the narrative, often depicted as the epitome of Holocaust suffering, sometimes even portrayed as objects of sexual desire with an erotic display of the sexualised female body. It fails to acknowledge what Butler terms the “multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ is constructed”. Films like "Schindler’s List" (1993), "The Reader" (2008), "In Darkness" (2011), are analysed as they provide powerful images that help in transmitting and creating collective memory of the Holocaust.

KEYWORDS: gender, holocaust films, memory, women

INTRODUCTION

Films have always been an important medium through which the memories of the Nazi Holocaust have been articulated and re-articulated. The popular Holocaust films have time and again conveyed to us the horrors of the Holocaust and also human resilience when confronted with evil and death. The stories of survival, rescue and memories of the Holocaust were conveyed through these cultural scripts. But then these constructed memories often fall into the pitfalls of gender discourse in their often peripheral stereotypical sexualized representation of women. With regard to Holocaust, women have always been what Ingrid Lewis terms “the silenced gender” (Lewis, 2017, p.15). Women’s experiences are silenced in mainstream Holocaust representation. There is a general consensus that the study of women and the Holocaust is organised upon preconceived gender roles and the memory of the Holocaust structures its images upon a rigid gender stereotyping that gets

perpetuated in the representation of women in popular Holocaust films like "Schindler's List" (1993), "The Reader" (2008) and "In Darkness" (2011). The metaphor of the "silent gender" is being utilised to analyse how the experiences of women have been variously neglected, overlooked, marginalised, disregarded and misrepresented, in the popular medium of films, and how the male protagonist as a saviour has been accentuated and women characters have often been relegated to the border of the narrative, often depicted as the epitome of Holocaust suffering, sometimes even portrayed as objects of sexual desire with an erotic display of the sexualised female body.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

For the present study Descriptive Qualitative Research Method is applied. The primary data is taken from the films "Schindler's List", "The Reader" and "In Darkness". For secondary data related literary books, articles, journal of prints and online sources, have been consulted.

DISCUSSION:

Professor Ronit Lentin points out that there is a "deafening silence" that "envelops the link between gender and genocide in relation to the Shoah" (Lentin, 2000, p.693). Gender should be viewed as not simply a biological difference between man and woman but as a complicated socially constructed set of norms, behaviours and relationships that have evolved in accordance with a patriarchal society. As Judith Butler points out that "gender is a reiterated social performance" (Lewis, 2017, p.8). There is a monolithic representation of women based on the universal binary paradigm of powerful men and powerless women. It fails to acknowledge in terms of Butler the "multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' is constructed" (Butler, 1990, p.19).

"The image of woman as an icon of victimhood, innocent and passive, waiting to be rescued by a male hero, goes hand in hand with the representational requirements of classic cinema" (Lewis, 2017, p.151).

Holocaust narratives have always focused on the male perspectives which have been taken as prototypical of the experiences of all Holocaust victims. However, the Holocaust was not just one event, but many different events, witnessed by many different people, over several years and covering an extensive geographical area. The feminist approach to the Holocaust is an acknowledgement of this heterogeneity. Moreover, the experiences of women during the Holocaust and those of men were not the same and though they were exterminated as part of the plan of annihilation called the Final Solution, their experiences of terror were very much differentiated by gender. In Myrna Goldenberg's term "Different horrors, same hell". "Women's

biological destiny” was targeted differently within the Nazi ideology. Nazi racial doctrines made the destruction of Jewish mothers a specific objective in the extermination of the Jewish race. Mothers and children were thus, unlike in all previous wars, made specific targets for brutal elimination. “Sexual assault was frequent, and took forms that are surprising when seen only in the light of canonical male experiences. Being stripped and shaved, for example, is all but inevitably presented in men's writing as a general, psychological experience of dehumanization, but is felt more personally by women as a material, sexual assault on their selves as women- a “dewomanization” (McCullough, 2000). There is an intricate web of Holocaust experiences in which women are found at every possible intersection: as women in ghettos, concentration camps and in hiding, women who perished in the Holocaust and women who survived, women who succumbed to despair and women who by their courage defied the crushing Nazi system, women who were persecuted and also women who sided with the persecutors. Due to the variety of their gendered experiences, the category “women” “is a highly heterogeneous and all-inclusive one.” (Lewis, 2017, p.9) As such what can be seen is a “set of dialogic encounters by which variously positioned women articulate separate identities” (Butler, 1990, p.20). Popular Holocaust movies in conforming to the dictates of classic cinema where women are defined strictly in relation to their male counterparts have time and again failed to acknowledge and portray such a dialogic interaction and have kept on assigning passive roles to women. Classic cinema has always accentuated the graphic image of the woman as a victim, innocent and passive, waiting to be rescued by a male hero.

The rescue narratives in Holocaust cinema tend to acknowledge the contribution of men as rescuers more than that of women like Oskar Schindler, the protagonist of Steven Spielberg’s multi-awarded film *Schindler’s List* (1993), or Leopold Socha of *In Darkness* (2011) who are portrayed as common people who make considerable efforts to save the lives of innocent Jewish victims. They are even flawed individuals who don’t function on some high, lofty level of perception about the world but they attain heroic stature who selflessly risked their own lives to save innocent Jewish lives in the face of Nazi atrocities. A closer look at these films also reveals significant gendered disparities. Leopold Socha helped a group of Polish Jews hiding in the sewers of Lviv and the narrative is centred on actions of rescue performed by the male protagonist. The character of Wanda Socha, the wife of Leopold is relegated to the background, and when she surfaces, she is portrayed as a reluctant wife who doesn’t appreciate her husband’s endeavour of helping the Jews in the sewers rather doesn’t want to know anything about it. She is caught up in her own domestic life and does want him to be involved in such dangerous activities as it would jeopardize her own family life. It only helps to highlight how Leopold goes against all odds to help the Jews even

putting the lives of his wife and daughter at risk. It only adds to the collective image of rescuers as men who put their lives in peril in an attempt to save persecuted Jews, while highlighting women as a permanent hindrance, obstructing men's noble actions with base, material concerns. There are voyeuristic scenes of the female body on display- naked Jewish women chased by Nazi men and ultimately killed in a forest, Wanda Sacha in the lovemaking scene with her husband. Jewish women in the sewage suffer, one even gives birth to a child but the female suffering is relegated to the background and is often shown as secondary characters validating the male narratives.

In Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) the character of Oskar Schindler conforms to the notion of the traditional patriarchal hero -a flawed character but one who is a good man who is aided by his Jewish accountant, Yitzhak Stern in his endeavour to rescue innocent Jews and is thwarted by the villainous Nazis like Amon Goethe and the Nazi soldiers. At no point does his wife Emile Schindler or for that matter any woman help in the development of the story. The women in the film perform the role of either victim waiting to be rescued or providing moral support as Emile Schindler does when she joins her husband in the factory for the Jews in his hometown. She is absent from the main action and appears quite later in the film. Then there is the lure of the female sexualised body seen in the cabaret dancer and the mistresses of both Goethe and Schindler. There are exceptions like the Jewish woman engineer who proudly tells Amon Goethe that the foundations of a building are unsafe and will need rebuilding, he calls her a 'Jew bitch engineer', and shoots her dead in the back of the head. This brings to the fore the fact that survival was in large part dependent on Jewish people enacting gender-specific roles and maintaining particular aspects of femininity and masculinity. The film portrays women's survival as depending on their conforming to their specific feminine roles. Helena Hirsche survives by remaining passive in the face of horrors and violence inflicted on her by Amon Goethe. Her sexual abuse and molestation scenes are treated graphically and verge on voyeuristic pleasure. It shows how "women's experience of sexual abuse" in films "is often obfuscated by the camera lens or director's point of view" (M. Hedgepeth, 2010, p.7). Presenting Jewish women as attractive victims only belittles the unimaginable horrors that they had to endure for survival. Regina Pelman with false identity papers wishes to gain an interview with Oscar Schindler but when he looks at her from the top of the stairs and sees her drab appearance she is turned away. The next time she appears with makeup, he sees her. Schindler is portrayed as the father, the protector, and the saviour. Thus, it relates to the construction of men around mythical elements of masculinity. Commercial imperatives dictate mainstream feature films to adopt patriarchal narratives and conventional gendered stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Although these films provide valuable accounts of history to the post-

Holocaust generation, they fall within the pitfalls of Holocaust narratives of gender stereotyping and gender disparities.

Moving away from the clichéd images of victims and perpetrators pervading popular Holocaust films, *The Reader* (2008) challenges the assumption that all women who assumed an active role in the oppression were monstrous and perverse often playing peripheral roles. Hanna Schmitz is constructed by bringing together different events in her life: the love affair with Michael, the trial of the six female guards, and events that happen long after the trial. This more rounded picture leads to a better understanding of who Hanna was and, in particular, allows us to see that far from being a monster, she was just an ordinary woman. Seen through the devoted eyes of Michael we glimpse into the normal routine life of a hardworking ordinary woman who is passionate, has an avid interest in books and even cries when a character in a novel that Michael reads out dies. Her illiteracy that she hides only comes to the fore during her trial and it seems to have an impact on all her decisions. The detailed attention to her working-class life does not efface her guilt but rather reflects upon how she became a camp guard, an SS in the first place. It was as if she was unable or unwilling to see the bigger picture of the machinery of persecution that she was contributing to. This film functions as a powerful counter-narrative to traditional ways of recounting historical events and breaks away from the traditional dominance of male subjectivity in history. It gives women voices who have been traditionally marginalised and “othered”. However, this film is not without its limitations in reference to women’s portrayal. It abounds in erotic displays of the female sexualised body. In highly sexualised scenes Hanna’s body becomes the site of Michael’s erotic and sexual fantasies. There is downright objectification of the female body as she becomes the object of male desire. The whole film is dominated by what Laura Mulvey terms “the male gaze” (Mulvey, 1989, p.19). Mulvey pointed out how often in films “the man controls the film fantasy” and the woman becomes the “spectacle” (Mulvey, 1989, p.20). As such *The Reader* falls also into the pitfalls of popular Holocaust films where female sexuality is exploited for spectacle.

CONCLUSION:

There prevails a vigorous interconnection between gender, film, and the history and memory of the Holocaust. The film medium can be considered as part of a broader platform on which discourses about the past are constantly revisited, challenged, and reformulated. Women’s voices enrich our perspective of the Holocaust, seen not as a monolithic category but as a myriad of different experiences that are inevitably gendered. The memory of the Holocaust structures its images upon rigid gender stereotyping. The persistence over time of such clichéd images in Holocaust films is explained by the fact that female stereotypes change more slowly than male ones.

Holocaust cinema is predominantly a conservative platform that acknowledges women but tends to portray them according to a series of clichéd images. Popular Holocaust films provide powerful images that help in transmitting and creating collective memory of the Holocaust but they fail to engage at a deeper level with the representation of women's experiences and to give a voice to their memories.

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