

# Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress*: A Woman's Discourse of the Holocaust.

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**Abstract:** Sherri Szeman's novel *The Kommandant's Mistress* published in 1993 is studied as a Holocaust fiction from the gendered perspective. Holocaust fiction writers like Szeman gives voice to women's experience. Rachel, the female protagonist is a Jewish woman who survives the Holocaust in the notorious Auschwitz Concentration camp by becoming a sex slave to the Nazi Kommandant Max Von Walther. Szeman also gives voice to Max's version of the story in the first part of the novel and it gives an insight into the male memory of a Nazi perpetrator whereas Rachel's memory is one of trauma that cannot be easily articulated nor be forgotten. She suffers gendered persecutions as she is raped, sexually abused - experiences which though happened frequently rarely gets articulated in testimonies as there is always the shame of survival attached to it.

**Key words:** Gender, Holocaust fiction, Memory, Trauma.

## Body

The Holocaust as an archetypal trope has always captured our imagination. The canon of Holocaust literature has predominantly been defined by masculine testimonies. But there are a host of fictional women writers who has given voice to the women's experience of the Holocaust and therein lies their importance. Sherri Szeman, an American with no direct involvement with the Holocaust has used imagination to create a fictional testimony of a woman's experience in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. This kind of fiction is important because "women's experiences are rarely central to the presentation of a 'typical' Holocaust story" (Horowitz, 1998). It is important that certain aspects of the female historical experience often remain suspended in testimony and get addressed in fiction. Shulamit Reinharz remarks "The original reluctance of the public, and researchers as well, to study women's experience rested in the mistaken notion that an underlying question was "who suffered more, women or men?" (Reinharz, 2010, p. IX) but women suffered differently than men as they suffered gendered persecutions- they were raped, sexually abused, sterilized, assigned to brothels and subjected to special medical experimentation and such experiences can never be ignored or remain unexplored if we want to get a wider historical perspective of the Holocaust. Female voices have gradually become more numerous and noticeable on every level of Holocaust discourse.

Sexual abuse is not an easy topic that gets highlighted in testimonies of women as there is a greater element of shame and stigma associated with it. But this is the typical aspect of the female experience that gets voiced in fictional texts. Men and women suffered differently during the Nazi enactment of the Final Solution and women's experience of terror was very much differentiated by gender. In Myrna Goldenberg's terms "Different horrors, same hell". Marion Kaplan has pointed to the fact that many women particularly young women were silent after the Holocaust, the reason was that they did not deem the story relevant to the larger picture of the Holocaust especially when it contain elements of sexual violation of gender-related matters. Thus they judged their experience to be trivial in comparison. The story of Rachel in the novel is the story of countless

women whose stories often remain untold, unclaimed and silenced. A subjective narrative of a woman's defiance, her subjugation and final retribution is told against the historical backdrop of a war machinery of mass murder in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Sherri Szeman thus successfully creates a private microcosm of an individual agony within a historical macrocosm of the Holocaust.

Narrated using the stream of consciousness technique the book contains parallel narratives with contrasting recollections of a shared past. It delves into the consciousness of a victimised woman and a brutal perpetrator. It also very subtly exposes the gender power struggle between a Nazi commandant and a Jewish woman who is forced to become his sex slave. Max Von Walther, the Nazi Kommandant indulges in violent sex with the defenseless Jewish girl and he sees it as an extremely emotional experience and even speaks of having saved Rachel: "I was no murderer. I didn't kill the girl. I protected her. She was a Jew"(Szeman, 1993, p.90) and "all I had done for her: fed her, clothed her, kept her safe, warm" (Szeman, 1993, p.95). With these words he wants to absolve himself from all his crimes and regression as a man and a Nazi. In his delusion of having a relationship with the girl he tried to give a gun to the girl to kill him several times but she never did anything. He believed that she never wanted to harm him. "She came to me when I needed her, and she didn't demand anything of me in return" (Szeman, 1993, p.52). The character of Rachel is that of a woman who suffers persecution not only as a Jew but also becomes a sexual captive suffering innumerable humiliations at the hands of the Kommandant becoming his prisoner at his office. However, Rachel's testimony only exposes his barbarity and at the same time, it is a confession of the survival tactics of a woman- her silence and her acceptance of the role of a sex slave. The apparent inconsistencies of the narration of Van Walther and Rachel show their subjective response to the incidents that underlie their experience of the Holocaust. Rachel's experience of the Holocaust colours the life that she has afterwards, even her marriage to David who is also a survivor of the Holocaust and to whom he cannot disclose the humiliating experiences that she went through to survive the Holocaust. Her inability to articulate the trauma can also be seen in her inability to give expression to the book that she wants to write after the war.

Rachel's silence as a woman in sexual captivity against the Kommandant's incessant talking in Auschwitz and the woman suddenly speaking up after her liberation from the camp when she is no longer afraid of her captor only attracts the anger of the Kommandant who no longer has a power over her. It only shows the sexual bigotry of the man no longer having power over the woman. There are a lot of inconsistencies in the recollection of events of Von Walther and Rachel. The male memory tends to justify the barbarity and the brutality of his actions which often leads to the concealment of facts: "I am a good man. We were all good men. Bad men couldn't have saved Germany. Bad men couldn't have done what we did" (Szeman, 1993, p.30). On the other hand, the female memory only highlights the guilt and the shame of her survival. Her deliberate act of remaining silent in her captivity is an act of defiance on her part to not verbally have any connection with the perpetrator. This act of repudiation only shows her hatred and revulsion against a formidable enemy and her attempt to gain control in an otherwise despairing situation.

The recollection of women survivors undergoing sexual torment at the hands of their Nazi perpetrators is rare as there is always a sense of humiliation and stigma attached to that kind of experience and they seldom disclose them. Fictionalized representation of such experiences allows the writer to give detailed description of such gruesome experiences which otherwise remain silent. In recent years many women's voices have enlivened much of the Holocaust discourse. Fiction provides a very dynamic medium through which the discourse of the Holocaust has been invented and reinvented time and again. Testimonies of women survivors only opened up the discourse of women's experience but there is no sense of closure for them. Only fiction could provide that. Rachel towards the end could avenge her tormentor. It offers closure to a personal history of trauma and suffering. To be able to verbally accuse her abuser disclosing her sense of torture and torment at the hand of a sexually abusive man is her way of taking control of her present and initiating revenge that would give her some

semblance of closure. Her survival was not only a survival of a Jew but also a survivor of sexual abuse intrinsically related to her gender identity.

Szeman's novel reiterates the hegemony of masculinity over femininity - where men have always subjugated and oppressed women: Max and the other male perpetrators against Rachel and other female Jewish victims and also the female underground Resistance. Max exemplifies the male hegemony; he is a misogynist and he has an oversimplified view of gender: "I don't think women understand men's work. They're so intent on family that they don't see that the family couldn't exist without everything that we men do, without our work. But men understand each other, without having to talk about it" (Szeman, 1993, p.6). Rachel's passiveness excites Max. He keeps on describing her body and her frailty and vulnerability are sexually stimulating to him: "[s]he seemed so frail, so beautiful" (Szeman, 1993, p.84). The female body becomes the site of exerting dominance and in the process, Rachel is dehumanised by her perpetrators. It also becomes the medium of Rachel's survival. Rachel is offered as a birthday gift to Dieter, she is sexually and physically abused and there are instances of rape. The sexual body is "meant to shock into realization of the obscene horror, but can end up titillating" (Sicher, 2013, p.384), The eroticism displayed in the many sexualised scenes in the novel has been severely criticised as it often excites voyeuristic pleasure and they often verge on pornography. Rachel's initiation and voluptuous involvement in sex with Max are often very disturbingly portrayed in explicit scenes in the novel. Max's description of Rachel's body and her numerous erotic performances brings to our mind the dominance of the "male gaze", the objectification of the female body, where the female body becomes the object of heterosexual male desire. Szeman caters to the male fetish of the female body and eroticism. Thus it deviates the reader from the historical reality by putting a lot of emphasis on the sexual relationship and ends up treating the Holocaust as just a sensational backdrop.

Rachel cannot let go of the trauma of the past. She is caught up in the stasis of her past. She carries with her the shame of survival and is frequented by nightmares and makes suicide attempts. Her initial inability to write about her camp experience shows her inability to verbalize the trauma of her existence at the camp. "She died there" (Szeman, 1993, p.209) She does not want to reclaim her past. Rachel's poem "The Dead Bodies" is viewed by Max as an act of betrayal on the part of Rachel. Rachel's silence in the first part had allowed Max to impose on her his subjective truth. So Max sees the sexual abuse that he inflicts upon Rachel as "making love" where he in his vulnerable position shares his truths with her: "I tried to show her the real me" (Szeman, 1993, p.93). Szeman's work is all about remembering the past and about memories that prevent the characters involved from resuming normal life after their shared experiences. Within the reality of friction Szeman provides an illustration of the psychological ramifications for both the victim and the abuser and the strangely entangled lives against the backdrop of a concentration camp.

There is a lot of ambiguity attached to Rachel's survival as her being complacent in her role as the sex slave to the Nazi perpetrator. The question that naturally arises is whether her story of victimization is subjective or it is a part of her collective identity as a Jew. The moral ambiguity and dilemma of her survival at any cost should be assessed in terms of her being placed in a situation beyond her control and in a place "where the normal concepts of choice and responsibility were radically undermined" (Brown,2013, p.2) and as such any moral evaluation and judgement are often very debatable. Rachel's behaviour and her apparent acceptance of her role as a sex slave bear resemblance to what Lawrence L. Langer terms "choiceless choices" as "crucial decisions [that] did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing." (Langer, 1982, p.72) Langer further states "Choiceless choices are perversions of power and will; they proclaim the impotence of the victim, who contaminates his future by the very compulsion to survive in which his oppressors seek to drown his moral nature." (Langer, 1982, p.146) The decisions of Rachel are made under extreme duress and the notions of purpose or choice which are central to most notions of integrity and discernment, cannot be assessed fully. Thus moral

systems employed to judge Rachel and condemn her behaviour are a luxury that cannot be used to understand her behaviour. To sacrifice ambiguity for the sake of coherence is a foolhardy exercise to make sense of an impossible past.

## Conclusion

Szeman's novel is an exploration of the subjectivity of memory and the ambiguity of human behaviour. The novel points out the main difference between the victim and the oppressor. The victims remember, they are haunted by the past and are never free from it while the oppressor finds excuses in the logic of war to forget. Despite many of its controversial aspects of representation this fictional memoir encourages discussion about the female concentration camp experience, the portrayal of victim and perpetrator and the representation of the Holocaust in fiction in general as it becomes another form of Shoah remembrance.

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