

## Motherhood Falling into Idolatry: The Story of a Jewish Mother in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

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### Stories of Jewish Mothers

The "Jewish mother" evokes a certain kind of stereotype. She is overanxious, aggressive, and domineering, and "hovers over her children, preventing them from achieving autonomy by interfering, cajoling, advising, and manipulating."<sup>(1)</sup> The origin of her notoriety could be traced to the change in environment due to immigration. In the Old World of Eastern Europe, where the Jews were exposed to poverty and pogrom, a Jewish mother's strong personality and attuned business sense to earn a living, along with her outlook and cordial protection of her children, were highly admired. So were those in the lower east side of New York, where she had to struggle with poverty and an undesirable neighborhood. However, as those dangers disappeared with the improvement of their living standards in the New World, her strong personality and level of anxiety became inappropriate. Then those characteristics, once admired, became the target of relentless mockery and satire.

Fear of being smothered by domineering mothers was not exclusive to Jewish men. Yet it became strongly linked with the Jewish mother, partly due to her features historically developed, and ironically, partly due to Jewish male writers' talent. Thus, the "Jewish mother" came to proliferate in the writing of Jewish males in the mid-twentieth century. The most famous example is Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. Sophie Portnoy is obsessed with her middle aged son and insists on knowing every aspect of his life, including details about his meals and even of his defecation, as if knowledge can protect her son from dangers to come. Roth makes a real laughingstock of her, without recognizing the historical and psychological factors which surround her. On the other hand, even when Jewish male writers describe their mothers with appreciation and admiration, their descriptions are only outsiders' views. In *Herzog*, Saul Bellow nostalgically describes the protagonist's mother who totally devoted herself to her son when they lived in a poverty-stricken ghetto, but the author's idealization can never expose her inner conflicts nor sufferings from her emotional depths. This condition has lasted for a long time, and the world of Jewish mothers is left largely unexamined.

However, Jewish women writers have finally started to raise their voices and to make sure they are heard, now more than ever. Kim Chernin, for example, goes back to the Bible in *Reinventing Eve* and finds a new and positive meaning in the story of Eve,

regarding her biting the forbidden fruit as an act of taking the mother's capacity, "that female creative power all mention of which has been left out of the Genesis story."<sup>(2)</sup> Anne Roiphe examines in *Lovingkindness*, the shaking psyche of the mother, who has tried to raise her daughter according to her feminist belief and feels betrayed when her daughter decides to join an ultra-orthodox sect in Jerusalem. Cynthia Ozick also writes about the theme of mother-daughter relationships in several novels and stories. Among all, *The Shawl* deals with this theme most to the fore, centering on a woman who goes through the Holocaust and the aftermath of the Second World War. She surely is a Jewish mother. Totally devoted to her daughter, she protects her with all her might. In doing so, she also goes off the right path and reveals the deficiencies of her character. Ozick's picture of motherhood here is pathetic and dark, and yet she explores her psyche with profound sympathy and deep insight, suggesting in the last scene the slight possibility for the mother to restore herself.

### "The Shawl"

"The Shawl" is the story of the mother who goes through the Nazi concentration camp struggling desperately to save her baby. Although the story is compressed into the short span of seven pages, Ozick captures the horrifying reality of the death camp. One of her main strategies here is the succinct and metaphorical narrative with the least of rhetoric. When the story opens with the scene of three females being forced to march, Rosa, the mother, with Magda, her baby hidden between her breasts wrapped in a shawl, going with Stella, Rosa's teenage niece, the reader is not informed of why they are forced to march nor where they are headed. It is only the yellow star of David sewn to the mother's coat that tells us they are Jews and headed to the Nazi camp. The extremity of their starvation and exhaustion is inferred from terse descriptions of their bodies: Stella's "knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones"<sup>(3)</sup> and Rosa's dry breasts are "dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole"(4). Stella's faint utterance of "Aryan"(5) when she examines Magda's yellow hair and blue eyes is the only voice heard in the whole story. For all its ultimate curtailment, it has shattering impact, revealing not only the deadly silence of human sound in the camp but also the brutal and fatal fact that Rosa is raped by a Nazi soldier and thereby conceived Magda. By means of this succinct and metaphorical narrative, Ozick succeeds in presenting the reality of the Nazi death camp unthinkably harsh without sentimentalization nor numbing the reader with the flood of the horrifying atrocities. It also avoids deliberately an easy and immediate response of the reader and urges one to become engaged in an active imagining essential for the understanding of the unimaginably dark dimension of the Holocaust.

Ozick's other strategy to expose the keynote of the camp is her employment of ironic contrast between life and death. Here is one of the few descriptions of nature throbbing and bursting with life:

The sunheat murmured of another life, of butterflies in summer. The light was placid, mellow. On the other side of the steel fence, far away, there were green meadows speckled with dandelions and deep-colored violets; beyond them, even farther, innocent tiger lilies, tall, lifting their orange bonnets. (8)

However, it is the sight Rosa glimpses beyond the electric fence when she desperately runs to search for Magda. Magda has loitered out of the barrack for the first time in search of the shawl which Stella took to warm her up. In other words, the paragraph cited above is put in the midst of the imminent and lethal capture of Magda by a Nazi guard. Besides, it is immediately compared to the nature of the barracks, "flowers"(8) and "rain" (8) referring to excrement, urine, and the stink mixed with a "bitter fatty floating smoke"(9) of crematoria. Ozick thus underscores the fatal remoteness and impossibility of life, pitting nature's exuberance against the world unfathomably dark and deadly. Similarly the baby's growth normally associated with life and joy is completely reversed here, hence eerie. Magda's first tooth is "an elfin tombstone of white marble"(4) and her sporadic laughter at the shawl's funny move is caused by the "wind with pieces of black"(6) from crematoria. When she begins to walk, Rosa has an ominous premonition that Magda is walking to death, which turns out to be true at the end of the story. Likewise, Magda's first utterance of sound since the march overwhelms Rosa, because it dispels her doubt that Magda is a mute and deaf, but at the same time it fatally attracts the Nazi guard's attention, dooming Magda. Thus Ozick efficiently describes the world totally immersed in death by means of the powerful and ironic contrast between life and death.

Against the conditions so hostile and constantly life-threatening, motherhood becomes Rosa's whole existence. She thinks nothing but the baby's needs and safety, giving the starving baby most of her scarce food and hiding the baby in the barracks at the great risk of her life. It is the only way for Rosa to keep the baby alive. Besides, deprived of her beloved parents and everything by the Nazis, she has nothing left except Magda. Now motherhood becomes her only life-sustenance, maternal instinct, her only surviving drive. Hence, she is strongly associated throughout the story with motherhood, in particular with breast-imagery. Rosa, who keeps marching to the camp and nursing the baby at her breast, is a "walking cradle"(3) and like "someone in a faint, in trance arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel"(3), totally devoted to the baby. When she realizes Magda is going to die, it is "a tide of commands hammed in Rosa's nipples"(8) that she feels.

Finally the fateful day comes. As soon as Rosa sees Magda stray into the roll-call arena in search of the lost shawl, Rosa pursues her. However, Magda is already in the perilous sunlight of the arena, howling in grievance for the loss of the Shawl. Rosa hesitates, not knowing which way to go first. If she goes after Magda and gets her, she wouldn't stop howling. But if Rosa runs back into the barrack, finds the shawl, and

comes back to Magda with it, she would stop howling, and thereby become inconspicuous. So, Rosa frenetically runs back to the barrack, tears it away from Stella, and runs outside again. Nonetheless, it is too late. Magda is carried on the shoulder of the Nazi guard further and further into the distance and finally hurled at the electric fence to death. At the final scene, Rosa is forced to stand at the most painful crossroads; to run to the dead child's body to pick her up and embrace even if they will shoot, or to stay still, stifling the scream welling up within her for her own survival:

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 and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf's screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva; and Rosa drank Magda's shawl until it dried.(10)

It seems that maternal instinct that urges her to run up to the child's body and self-preservation that compels her to stay silent conflict fiercely each other, and the fact that she stays seems to indicate that the latter instinct for the first time in the story becomes predominant. However, Rosa's following act of stuffing the shawl into her mouth adds more ambiguity, when we consider that the shawl permeated with Magda's scent and saliva may well be symbolic of Magda. Barbara Scrafford explains her unique interpretation of Rosa's final act as "a symbolic final frantic attempt . . . to protect her offspring."<sup>(4)</sup> :

Like a cornered wild animal, she devours her young in the form of the shawl. Many animals, when cornered by a predator, do the same, for if the mother dies, the young will suffer a far worse fate at the jaws of the attacker.<sup>(5)</sup>

Agreeing with her, I understand this final act of Rosa's drinking the shawl as the only way left to her where she desperately and unconsciously attempts to keep Magda intact eternally at least within herself and thereby stuff the inner void formed by Magda's fatal loss. What other way is left to Rosa, who is reduced to the sole existence of motherhood and yet can neither save the child nor mourn her? How Rosa keeps Magda intact within herself is yet to be evolved into the main theme in the next story, "Rosa".

### "Rosa"

The second story takes place more than thirty years after the events depicted in the first story. It turns out through flashbacks, letters and conversations that both Rosa and Stella survived the Holocaust and immigrated to the USA after the liberation, and that Rosa opened a small antiques shop in New York in order to earn a living. Unable to

adapt to a new life in America after her traumatic experiences, she confined herself in the antiques store surrounded by the remnants and memories of the past. There she kept on talking about her experience of the Holocaust day after day to the customers, who would instantly lose interest and go out of the store. Frustrated and enraged by their total indifference, she was one day driven to an eruption of temporary madness and demolished her store with a big hammer. In order to avoid further trouble and a possible sentence, Stella dealt with the authorities and sent Rosa to a hotel for the elderly in Miami.

"Rosa" begins only at this stage, with Rosa now fifty-nine years old and leading a lonely and slovenly life in Miami. Her room is "a dark hole"(13) in a mess and her diet at random. On the day the story starts, Rosa notices her sheets unbearably dirty and drags herself to a nearby laundromat. Although it is only a few blocks away, it is a torture to her. The scorching heat is "killing"(15), the sun is compared to "executioner"(14), and the streets are "furnace"(14) reminding her of crematoria. The blue stripes of her cloth torments her with the memory of the prison uniform, and the barbed wire that circumscribes the private beach of a luxurious hotel with that of the electric fence of the camp. The daydream she has at dusk is a tableaux of the mothers and daughters desperately trying to escape from the clutches of the Nazis.

Darkened cities, tombstones, colorless garlands, a black fire in a gray field, brutes forcing the innocent, women with their mouths stretched and their arms wild, her mother's voice calling. After hours of these pitiless tableaux, it was late afternoon. . . . (44-5)

According to her, there exist three phases alone in her life; "the life before (the Holocaust), the life during, the life after"(58). For her, "the life before" is the most precious but is like a dream short-lived and gone, "after" is a joke empty and nonsense, and only "during" stays and haunts her forever. Deprived of her happy, youthful days so violently by the Nazis, Rosa still suffers from the traumatic memories and obsessions of the Holocaust day and night.

Her suffering is spurred by the academics and psychologists who are preoccupied with the Holocaust only to increase their academic achievements. When she comes back from the laundromat, two letters are waiting for her. One from Dr. Tree, researcher of survivor syndrome, proposes an interview with her. His explanation, ridden with nomenclature, is tremendously hard to understand, but Rosa sees beyond it his basic attitude to treat the survivors not as human beings but as "specimens"(43) or rare beasts for investigation or experiment. They are so to speak the Holocaust vampires, watering up their mouths over the survivors' suffering. Exploding into rage, she burns the letter in the sink.

Moreover, Rosa can not assimilate herself to the tide of American people who either

forget or make frivolous of the Holocaust and everything dangerous and repugnant. It seems too shallow and oblivious to her. Among them, she is especially enraged with the rich, light-minded and well assimilated Jews. Rosa regards Stella as one of them, because she fears and refuses the past and "as a result. . . has nothing,"(41). Rosa accuses her on this ground repeatedly. Ozick emphasizes the total loneliness of Rosa, who are shoved into the corner of society as a misfit, going against the current. Now we see Rosa, after a narrow escape from the death camp, condemned to live in a different kind of living death, just like so many Holocaust survivors in the postwar Jewish literature such as *Anya*<sup>61</sup> by Susan Fromberg Shaeffer, *The Accident* by Eli Wiesel, and *Enemy: A Love Story* by Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Throughout the course of the story Rosa acts on two major impulses, that are to disclose the intersecting depths of her emotion. One of them is to search for her missing underwear. After returning to the hotel from the laundromat, she opens the other letter, where Stella advises Rosa to stop acting like a misfit and change her way of living: "Rosa, by now. . . it's time, you have to have a life"(32). In response to it, Rosa starts to murmur fiercely that "thieves took it[life]"(32), sets to count the laundry "scrupulously, meticulously"(33), and finds out that a pair of underpants are missing. The moment the peculiar doubt crosses her mind that it might be stolen, she feels burning "pain in the loins"(34), strays into the streets and the beach of Miami, and keeps searching for it all through the evening as if possessed. "Thieves" who took her life refers obviously to the Nazis who destroyed her life thoroughly and "the pain in the loin." further described as "degrading"(34) and the "shame"(34), is subtly suggestive of the pain as she was raped during the Holocaust. Therefore, putting together all her acts and associations that seem inconsistent in fragments, her journey through the evening in Miami to look for the clean pair of her underpants is considered as her subconscious attempt to meticulously retrieve the world before the Nazi destruction, epitomized particularly in the innocent and pure self of Rosa before the Holocaust.

The other major impulse of Rosa is to write to her long-dead daughter Magda letters that are similarly filled with strong nostalgia for the lost world, condensed in her paternal home in prewar Warsaw. Rosa ardently writes how successful and well assimilated her family was, explaining how her father, direct general of the Bank of Warsaw, used to call himself a "Pole by right"(40) and how elegant their house was. Her parents dismissed Yiddish and spoke Polish instead, "with the most precise articulation"(68). Their extreme assimilation and fascination for paganism was hinted by the statue of the Virgin and Child which her mother, in enchantment, let the maid keep in the corner of the kitchen and by replicas of Greek vases her father had dug up on a trip to Crete. Most of all, it was reflected in the rich collection of books, completely lacking of Torah and its related books, but instead laden with thousands of books of "Polish, German, French; her father's Latin books"(21). Their collection of books further reveals one more characteristics of her parental home: it heavily relies its source on poems and fiction.

Rosa's mother is a poet who once published a poetry, whose literary talent was passed down to Rosa. Rosa herself loves to read Twuim, a Polish poet, and was praised for her "literary style"(20) in high school days. To sum up, what Rosa invokes by writing letters is also the pre-Holocaust world, substantiated particularly in her parental home strongly featured by its propensity for assimilation, paganism, refinement and art.

It is in this process of invoking the past that the deficient features of Rosa, the mother who guarded her baby with all her life during the Holocaust, gradually transpire. She deliberately selects, alters and ultimately goes so far as to forge the past to make her precious world perfect and immaculate. Its most overt manifestation throughout the story is Rosa's fabrication of long dead Magda day in and day out. Rosa denies Magda's death, a memory too painful to face, brings her back to life in imagination, and envisions her in several stages of her life. Magda emerges now as a successful, beautiful young woman: "a doctor married to a doctor; large house in Mamaroneck, New York; two medical offices, one on the first floor, one in the finished basement"(35). Next she is imagined as an intellectual thoroughly immersed in Hellenism: "A professor of Greek philosophy at Columbia University"(39). Lastly she springs up to life as an innocent young girl with artistic talent:

Rosa waited to see what age Magda was going to be: how nice, a girl of sixteen. . . . There was Magda, all in flower. She was wearing one of Rosa's dresses from high school. . . . She would have given everything to set her before an easel, to see whether she could paint in watercolors; or to have her seize a violin. . . .(64-5)

Ozick adds to Rosa's fantasy a funny note, making comic use of the "stereotype of the Jewish-American mother whose fondest wish is that her offspring be a wealthy professional who enjoys a wedded bliss yet has permanent maternal attachments."<sup>(7)</sup> At the same time these images of Magda transparently meet the characteristics of Rosa's adoring world I have discussed through her two major impulses in terms of the successful, superior and refined atmosphere, the penchant for paganism and art, and the pre-Holocaust, innocent self image. Rosa's yearning for the lost world has let her go to the lengths of reinventing Magda in the exact mold of Rosa's ideal.

Likewise, Rosa forges Magda's father as she wishes him to be. Although Magda's German appearance with her blue eyes and yellow hair clearly identifies her as one of the Nazi babies and Rosa admits that she was raped several times by them, she vehemently denies Stella's accusation in her letter to Magda: "Your father was not a German. I was forced by a German, it's true, and more than once, but I was too sick to conceive. Stella has a naturally pornographic mind, she can't resist dreaming up a dirty sire for you, an S.S. man!"(43) "No lies come out of me to you. You are pure"(43). She claims that her father is Andrzej, a son of a converted Jew, and that he and Rosa had a "respectable, gentle, cultivated"(43) life. By denying the depravity about Magda's paternity, Rosa tries

to metamorphose Magda into a sacred, pure, and most suitable baby.

With a mother's glorious pride, Rosa goes on and on writing the story of Magda. The excitement and joy she feels accelerates and she finally writes in her letter how overwhelming it is "to have the power to create another human being, to be the instrument of such a mystery. To pass on a whole genetic system. I don't believe in God. . . "(41). It now becomes clear that Ozick considers this act of Rosa as transgression and usurpation of the divine providence of creation. It is an act to recreate an alternative world in competence with God, to break the most fundamental Jewish taboo against idol worship. Rosa is now worshiping it under the disguise of sacred mother. Her idealization and adoration of Magda we have seen so far tell us that it is Magda who is the center of this alternative world Rosa creates and worships. That is why Magda's shawl, the only memento of Magda, is depicted as if it were an icon or idol of religious ritual. Rosa has asked Stella since long ago to send the shawl to her. When the package, which Rosa believes contains the shawl, finally arrives, she purifies everything, cleaning up her room perfectly and changing her underwear and clothes. She further prostrates herself before the package as if it were the altar. Stella comes directly to the point when she accuses Rosa for turning the shawl into the ultimate object of worship.

You [Rosa]ll open the box and take it [the shawl] out and cry, and you'll kiss it like a crazy person. Making holes in it with kisses. You're like those people in the Middle Ages who worshiped a piece of the True Cross, a splinter from some old outhouse as far as anybody knew, or else they fell down in front of a single hair supposed to be some saint's. (31-2)

It is noteworthy that her idealized world is created with the assistance of literary fiction. It is her most sophisticated, literary Polish and style that Rosa writes letters to Magda and fabricates stories about her. Thinking back on "The Shawl," the baby is already described to flop at the barracks doorstep with "little pencil legs scribbling this way and that"(7) in search of the shawl. The joy, excitement, and power she feels then is not only those of a mother but also of a writer. Furthermore it is not only those of Rosa who inherited her literary talent from her poet mother but also of Ozick, a writer. Here, another theme of this novella surfaces from behind the theme of motherhood and idol worship. In an essay entitled "Literature as Idol: Harold Bloom" Ozick straightforwardly expresses her strong misgiving that "literature. . . is an idol."<sup>(8)</sup> According to her, an artist is the most susceptible to the world's beauty which forms the materials of her art. Hence it seems impossible for an artist not to slide off from awe at God's creation to worship of God's creation. For her, being an artist is worshiping gods of nature and creating substitute worlds of these Gods. Ozick writes about this danger and conflict Jewish writers have in common in her essay entitled "The Riddle of the Ordinary":



And just here is the danger . . . Yeats darkly apprehended—the deepest danger our human brains are subject to. The Jew has this in common with the artist: he means nothing to be lost on him, he brings all his mind and senses to bear on noticing the Ordinary, he is equally alert to Image and Experience, nothing that passes before him is taken for granted, everything is exalted. If we are enjoined to live in the condition of noticing all things—or, to put it more extremely but more exactly, in the condition of awe—how can we keep ourselves from sliding off from awe at God's Creation to worship of God's Creation?<sup>(9)</sup>

Although Ozick keeps this conflict submerged in a background in this novella, it oozes itself out from behind, interwoven with this novella's primary theme of motherhood and idolatry, and leaves its vestiges all over. The fact that Rosa's idol world is associated so strongly with the worship of pagan art, in particular with pagan literature, as we have seen in her description of paternal home, owes to this abiding conflict which Ozick holds, to her fascination in the world's beauty as an artist and her strong misgiving about idolatry as a Jewish writer.

In her essay cited above, "Literature as Idol: Harold Bloom," Ozick explains the major characteristics of idol worship and its inherent, dehumanizing effects on the worshipers. She points out that the chief characteristic of any idol is that it is "a sufficient system in itself."<sup>(10)</sup> It is a closed system leading back only to itself and indifferent to the world and to humanity. It lures them tenderly to become like it and makes them worship it as substitute God, but it is eventually an imitation of fixed image. Therefore it results in forcing people to be limited, fated and rigid, on the contrary to God who is not "contained in his own creation; the creation is incarnate in nothing,"<sup>(11)</sup> therefore, "free of any image or imagining"<sup>(12)</sup> :

Scripture tells us that the human being is made in the image of God, and since we do not know how to adumbrate God, we remain as free, as unpredictable, as unfated in our aspirations as quicksilver. But when we make ourselves into the image of an image, no matter how flexible the imagination of aspiration, we are bound, limited, determined, constrained; we cannot escape the given lineaments, and no matter how multitudinous are the avenues open to us, they all come, as in a maze, to a single exit.<sup>(13)</sup>

As a closed system, it excludes rigidly all who don't fit into it. It furthermore despises and hates them. Rosa holds deep contempt and repulsion for the working class Jews, which becomes clear when she writes about her family's experience of being billeted with them in the Warsaw ghetto. Her writing ridicules relentlessly "these old Jew peasants worn out from their rituals and superstitions, phylacteries on their foreheads sticking up so stupidly, like unicorn horns, every morning"(67). Her total indifference

towards the children there was almost cruel, revealing the true nature of Rosa in the disguise of sacred mother:

The children were half dead, always sitting on boxes in tatters with such sick eyes, pus on the lids and the pupils too wildly lit up. All these families used up their energies with walking up and down, and bowing. . . and their children sat on the boxes and yelled prayers too. We thought they didn't know how to organize themselves in adversity. . . . (66-7)

In the paragraph following the one quoted above is revealed the true reason why Rosa was furious. She was "furious; because the same sort of adversity was happening to us[Rosa's family]"(67). Her anger then owes rather to the fact that they were regarded the same way with those Jews, because the Nazis did not make any distinction between the assimilated, cultivated Jews and religious, uneducated Jews.

Even now, decades after immigration to the USA, Rosa holds deep contempt for the common Jewish Americans. It is exemplified most explicitly in her attitude toward Persky, a retired manufacturer of garments and buttons, whom Rosa met at the laundromat. Her favorite phrase to Persky, "My Warsaw is not your Warsaw," first sounds to derive from the fact that Persky escaped Warsaw before the Holocaust, whereas Rosa had to go through the eradication of the city. However, her letter to Magda discloses a true account of it. Her Warsaw differs from his, because Jews were divided into two separate groups by the class system dominant in prewar Warsaw: the wealthy, assimilated, and cultured, and the poor, religious and unintelligent. Sharply edged in the following contrast of the two areas of Warsaw, the one where Rosa was raised and the one where Persky was, is her antipathy toward the groups of Jews Persky is derived from:

Cultivation, old civilization, beauty, history! Surprising turnings of streets, shapes of venerable cottages, lovely aged eaves, unexpected and gossamer turrets, steeples, the gloss, the antiquity! Gardens. Whoever speaks of Paris has never seen Warsaw.(21)

The Warsaw swarm, shut off from the grandeur of the true world. Neighborhoods of a particular kind. Persky and Finkelstein. "Their" synagogues—balconies for the women. Primitive.(52-3)

Persky's rise in the USA as a successful manufacturer of garments and buttons does not seem to Rosa to cover his vulgarity and mediocrity. She sums up his life as "trivial" and "useless": "Persky's life: how trivial it must always have been: buttons, himself no more significant than a button"(55). As long as she fails to find meaning in his ordinary life, so does she with her crude immigrant English in her own commonplace life.

Persky is not a trivial nor useless person as Rosa alleges him to be. His narrow

escape from Warsaw and his success in garment industry in the New World tells us that he went through all the hardships of the Jews during this period, starting with sweatshops and crowded tenements. Still he accepts and cherishes his past and his countrymen, and enjoys his present life in Miami. Contrary to Rosa who is haunted by death consciousness and idol world of fantasy, he accepts and affirms life as it is. His basic attitude, simple but affirming, is most illustrated in his following answer when Rosa complains her room is cramped: "I work from a different theory. For everything there's a bad way of describing, also a good way. You pick the good way, you get along better"(56).

It is with Persky's guidance that Rosa moves toward the world of life and reality although vacillating like a pendulum. Noting Rosa has no book in her room despite her strong interest in literature, he sincerely offers her a drive to library. Rosa senses that he understands what she is, and is filled with gratitude and comes to open up her mind little by little. Persky's advice to Rosa and the explanation of his basic attitude toward life in plain words, such as "you can't live in the past"(23) and "sometimes a little forgetting is necessary"(58), seem to be gradually ingrained in Rosa's feeling. When Persky has set the table in her bleak room, Rosa notices that this makes "the corner of the room look new, as if she had never seen it before"(56), suggesting the perspective she will take in the future. Furthermore, her room, cleaned up meticulously to welcome the shawl, the totem of her idol world, has turned out to welcome Persky as if "destiny has clarified her room just in time"(55).

Naturally there are sporadic explosions of backlash. Towards the end of the conversation with Persky, Rosa goes back to her old claim that she is "pure: a madonna"(59). When the package of the shawl finally arrives, it first seems like "an old bandage"(62) as if Rosa's wound has been healed, and arises no interest in her. Nonetheless it gathers after a while magical power to evoke the overwhelming image of Magda. Now Magda springs to life from the shawl in full bloom and Rosa frantically calls to her, "My Gold, my Wealth, my Treasure!"(66). However, it is again Persky's visit that breaks Rosa's fantasy and brings her back to reality. Thus the story ends in ambiguity, hinting that Rosa will have to go a long way yet for the full restoration of herself. <sup>(14)</sup>

### Motherhood and Idolatry in Ozick's Oeuvre

Many critics agree that one of the most central and recurring themes of Ozick is the dichotomy between Hebraism and Hellenism with its oppositions of fate and free will, aestheticism and moral seriousness, the gods of nature and the god of history. The irresistible lures of Hellenism mainly emerge as temptation of nature, pagan sensibility, and art for art's sake. In *Trust*, her first published novel, a college graduate confronts the Hebraic, Christian, and Hellenic values represented by her mother's three husbands. In "Pagan Rabbi," a studious rabbi is drawn to the nymph of a tree, seizing upon Nature as

god. Realizing he has fatally strayed from the right path, he hangs himself from the tree with his prayer shawl. In "Usurpation," Ozick depicts a writer who covets for stories, falls into idolatrous worship of art, and infringes upon the divine province of creation, showing her idea that "the story-making faculty itself can be a corridor to the corruptions and abominations of idol-worship, of the adoration of magical event."<sup>(15)</sup> Ever since the beginning of her writing career, Ozick has thus depicted grotesqueness of human being fallen in idol worship based on her abiding conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism.

It is in the late sixties that the feminist viewpoint began fusing into this theme. At the outset of her career Ozick purposely avoided writing about the subjects allotted to female writers such as love and romance, marriage, female friendship and domestic conflict, for fear of being labeled as "women writer," hence trivial. The protagonist of her first novel, *Trust*, for example, has no name nor clearly identifiable gender. However, along with the sweep of the women's movement, she comes to speak out about feminist issues in her essays. In "The Hole/Birth Catalog" that appeared in 1972, she denies the assertion that "anatomy is destiny," because it has "the logic of the hole,"<sup>(16)</sup> attributing all women's activity to a hole between their legs. She ridicules how it dictates their tasks, preoccupations, proprieties, tastes and characters:

Wondrous hole! Magical hole! Dazzlingly influential hole! Noble and effulgent hole! From this hole everything follows logically: first the baby, then the placenta, then for years and years and years until death, a way of life. It is all logic, and she who lives by the hole will live also by its logic. It is, appropriately, logic with a hole in it.<sup>(17)</sup>

She refutes the notion that defines woman solely by the act of parturition, which results in cutting her off from the rest of the world.

In her fictional works as well, she started to deal with feminist issues. In Puttermesser stories, the female protagonist, a brilliant and single lawyer, is gently snubbed in a prestigious, male-dominated law firm and later fired from her civil service job of New York city. Her dreams of becoming a mother and improving the city come true when she unconsciously forges from the soil of house plant a daughter golem, a figure in folk tale made in the form of human being and brought to life to fulfill its creator's dreams. Though Puttermesser and the golem start to reform the city, the golem soon rejects her redemptive charge, ending up in indulging in her monstrous sexual desire. Meanwhile Puttermesser becomes captive of her daughter golem, realizes that it has become her idol, and destroys it. In this story, feminist issues such as being a woman in male-dominated society, the relationship of mother and daughter, and remaking the utopian world according to a feminist vision, and other issues draw together.

Of all Ozick's works, *The Shawl* puts the theme of motherhood to the utmost. It warns of the danger of being forced to be the sole existence of motherhood, uniting it

with the danger of her old and consistent theme of idolatry. Rosa, under the name of sacred mother, creates an idol world with her lost daughter as its totem. It is a closed world sufficient of itself without any connection with the real world nor humanity, and excludes all that don't fit into it. Hence, it eventually causes horrible dehumanization on its worshiper. Ozick reveals it in Rosa's rigid trial to protect her world such as her altering the past in the exact mold of her ideal, her total separation from the people around her, and her hidden but deep contempt for her countrymen. However, Ozick's way to depict Rosa is filled with profound insight and sympathy. Ozick goes deep into Rosa's psyche and depicts Rosa through the deprivation of her dearest daughter, her survival of the death camp and her struggle in the post war America she can not adjust herself into, all of which accumulate and lead her to her idol world. It seems that Ozick thinks all human beings can not avoid falling into idol worship more or less and endears those who writhe and struggle there. Although Ozick's picture of motherhood in *The Shawl* is dark and bitter, her sympathy and endearment of Rosa leave a slight possibility for Rosa to restore herself at the end of the story. Ozick sees far beyond the stereotype of the "Jewish Mother," shedding new lights and casting deep shadows over it.

#### Notes

- (1) Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel. *The Jewish Woman in America*. New York: New American Library, 1975. p. 236.
- (2) Kim Chernin. *Reinventing Eve: Modern Woman in Search of Herself*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1987. p. xxvii.
- (3) Cynthia Ozick. *The Shawl*. New York: Vintage Books, 1980. p. 3. All quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number only.
- (4) Barbara Scrafford. "Nature's Silent Scream: A commentary on Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*". Critique, Fall 1989. p. 14.
- (5) *Ibid.*
- (6) *Anya* by Susan Fromberg Shaeffer depicts a mother who goes through the Holocaust, focusing on her relationship to her daughter. After the liberation she also opens a second-hand furniture shop to earn a living but can not find meaning in life.
- (7) Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Cynthia Ozick's Comic Art: From Levity to Liturgy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. p. 158.
- (8) Cynthia Ozick, "Literature as Idol: Harold Bloom," *Art and Ardor: Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983. p. 196.
- (9) *Ibid.* p. 206.
- (10) *Ibid.* p. 189.
- (11) *Ibid.* p. 207.
- (12) *Ibid.*
- (13) *Ibid.* p. 189.
- (14) According to *Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 1995, Rosa appears again in Ozick's first play, "Blue

Light", which was produced the summer of 1994. Ozick calls it a story "about the devil and his seduction." Rosa is seduced by an academic named Globals in this play. He pleads her to tell him about Magda, and Rosa so lonely and starved of affection, becomes off her guard. When Rosa finishes telling, Globals takes out a paper that says the Holocaust never happened. He urges Rosa to sign it and admit the baby along with her experiences in the death camp were a fabrication.

(15) Cynthia Ozick, *Bloodshed and Three Novellas*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976. p. 11.

(16) Cynthia Ozick. "The Hole/Birth Catalogue," *Art & Ardor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983. p. 249.

(17) *Ibid.* p. 252.