

# explorations



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## Of Abject Born - From Abject to Subject, Writing the Post-Abjection of Hell

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**Abstract.** Beyond the testimonial act, the feminine literature of Jewish female survivors' memoirs provides insight into the feminine experience of Jewish women during the Holocaust. This writing primarily expresses the abjection of the (feminine) self, which was brutally imposed on Jewish women by the Nazis. By abjection, I refer to the degradation, dehumanization, and defeminization of the feminine (Jewish) self, transforming it into the 'ultimate abject' that threatens the Aryan self. In the same movement, this feminine writing redeems the feminine self through poetics, bringing it into an existential state of being (a subject).

**Key words:** abject, post-abjection, Holocaust, feminine experience, feminine writing

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Ruth Sender is a Holocaust survivor who writes about her feminine experience in the Holocaust and after the war in the trilogy – *The Cage*, *To Life*, and *The Holocaust Lady*. She relates in an honest way her “journey” in and out of the Holocaust. In *The Cage*, Sender, who was a teenager when the Nazis came to power, recounts her life in the ghetto of Lodz and later in the concentration camps, Auschwitz, Mittelsteine, and Grafenort, where she was liberated by the Russians. In *To Life*, she depicts her struggle to rebuild her life in the displaced persons' camp, giving us insights about the predicament of survivors who returned to their homes only to meet hostility, hatred, and fear of being raped. In *The Holocaust Lady*, Sender recounts her life in America as a Holocaust survivor who deals with the aftermath of the Holocaust. As a Jewish history teacher, she devotes her life to fighting hatred by sharing her story with children of all ages.

The analysis of Sender's work in this paper is based on two main theories: the first is on Julia Kristeva's theory concerning the abject, stated in *Pouvoirs de L' Horreur* (*Powers of Horror*), and the second is this author's theory concerning the post-abjection that extends Kristeva's thesis, developed in *The Interaction between the Sexes, the Post-abjection of the Archaic Mother* (Steiner, 2014) and focuses on revenge. According to Kristeva, the abject is anything that transgresses law and order, or what disrupts the system. Kristeva delineates degrees of abject and includes in this definition excrement, body fluids, and blood. Death, especially the cadaver, is defined by Kristeva as the

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ultimate abject. The abjection, according to Kristeva, is one of the violent revolts of the self against anything that menaces it. The post-abjection, according to the author's theory, refers first and foremost to the belated act of settling scores with the factor of the barbaric oppression that deliberately defined the Jewish feminine self as abject. It also refers to the bold endeavor to voice the unvoiced while rising from ashes and testifying to the atrocities and wrongs inflicted upon the self during the Holocaust. By the act of writing, the narrator reverses the roles and values assigned by the Nazis, rejects the definitions, and tells her story within the realms of the narrative space. Narrating enhances the belated redefinition of the "abjected" self as a subject. The post-abjection, through writing about the Holocaust experience, allows the Jewish feminine self to reemerge, reappearing as subject and clearing itself from the abject through the representation of the real abject.

Being a very talented writer, Sender uses her gift as a belated weapon to settle scores with her perpetrators. Sender restores in the trilogy the feminine *I* that had been humiliated, debased, and turned into abject by the Nazis. By telling the other side of the Nazi story, her feminine Jewish story, she delineates a portrait of feminine Jewish strength that declares opposition to the Nazis' definitions and plans, capable of thwarting them. Through her writing, she defies and dismantles the Nazis' paradigms of abject by juxtaposing the Nazi oppression of the "subhuman" Jewish woman doomed to die with the survival strategies she put into practice in the darkest period of humanity, i.e., courage, hope, and defiance against all odds, her mother's legacy. As a response to the Nazi extermination program, she survives to tell her story in which she de-structures loss by breaking paradigms and blurring boundaries between opposites such as presence and absence, life and death, abject and subject, past and present. Sender also reconstructs life by having recourse to the post-abjection of hell, proving time and again that the Jewish feminine *I* is other.

## 2. "I IS THE OTHER"

Ruth Sender's trilogy (*The Cage*, *To Life* and *The Holocaust Lady*) inscribes itself in the significant corpus of the Holocaust literature, or, as Derrida coined it, "the monumemory" (cf. Douglas and Vogler, 2003, 45). Beyond the testimonial act, she provides us with the feminine experience of Jewish women in the Holocaust and expands our knowledge on this matter. The feminine writing voices, first and foremost, the abjection of the feminine self brutally inflicted upon Jewish women by the Nazis. Abjection refers to the expulsion of the Jews, including the Jewish women, from the non-Jewish world, first by dint of degradation, dehumanization, and then by extermination in the concentration camps. Being the Jewish child-bearers, and consequently defined as Hitler's fierce enemy (Kremer 2001, 2003), Jewish women were afflicted with additional misogynic treatment: the defeminization of the Jewish self, turning it by the means of violence, sexual assault, body search, abuse, and oppression into the 'ultimate abject' capable of threatening the Aryan self (Baer and Goldenberg 2003, Jordan 2010, Hertzog 2008, Ringlheim 1985, Ungar 1998, Waxman 2008). Sender redeems in her writing the feminine self by dint of aesthetics, language and a belated resistant narrative. This feminine writing brings the Jewish self back to the previous, essential existential state of being a subject, a subject that writes about itself. According

to Kristeva (1980), the abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the initial loss that laid the foundation of its own being. Narrating the loss, Sender's memoirs settle scores with the Nazis, vomiting the real abject from within memory only to become a writing subject (*I*) again, and to give birth to her self "amid the violence of vomit." Her past experiences are rendered in a special poetics that transcribes in every respect the ongoing abject presence of the Holocaust in her life<sup>1</sup>. Sender narrates her past through her present, which for her is merely a thin layer that constantly brings her back to her past. The past and the present are interwoven and interrelated. Delivering the past from the barriers of memory unleashes a mosaic writing space that blurs and defies temporal boundaries.

The nightmares fill most of my nights and stay with me throughout most days. I try hard not to think about them; Keep my mind busy; and remember the joys in my life, my children.

And then night comes. My yesterdays are back again. They become today. My children are in my dreams. I am a child myself and also a mother. I run from the Nazis, and my children are with me. (Sender, 1991, 3)

The constant movement back and forth that characterizes her present is reflected in her writing. The past that will never pass demands justice and a voice. This very past that refuses to be stored and repressed in memories by its stubborn presence and interference with the present stands up to the Nazis, who wanted to erase every living evidence. Consequently, it tells and retells itself, time and again, to assure its own existence.

The past-present existence of the narrator constitutes a revolt of the self, as well as a self-belated resistance regarding her past experiences in the Holocaust. By their recurring invasions in her present life, the memories perpetuate and inscribe in the present her persecutors' crimes. Ignoring both time and space, the invasions of past historical events aim to refute any attempt of repression and lost storage in history. Instead, they tell and re-tell her story in such a way that it bleeds into the identity of the consciousness and strongly impacts it. It seems that Sender cannot but write and tell the events that haunt her by night and by day. By the acts of language, she applies what Charaudeau (2009) calls *le droit de la parole* ("the right to speak"). Sender is very conscious of her status as a survivor, as well as of her role of voicing the silenced victims of the Holocaust. "Some do not have to worry anymore: They are dead. Others, half dead, do not care anymore. They lie motionless, waiting for the end to come and free them from this hell" (Sender, 1991, 161). By delineating the Holocaust's abject state of anonymous Jewish women,

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<sup>1</sup> LaCapra (2001, 68-70) distinguishes between acting out and mourning. He explains that "in acting out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed". Mourning involves "a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present- simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others. Possession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended, and working through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is required with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all. In some disconcertingly ambivalent form, trauma and one's (more or less symbolic) repetition of it may even be valorized, notably when leaving it seems to mean betraying lost loved ones who were consumed by it."

Sender eternalizes the Nazis' crimes, as well as the macabre life stories of the dead. Earlier in *The Cage* (Sender, 1991, 31), she laments her little brother's illness and eventual death. "I still hear the doctor's voice: *I am so sorry. I wish I could do something for him. I wish I could help. He has tuberculosis. He needs good food, fresh air, better living conditions, medicine. Maybe then he would have a chance*".

In *To Life* (Sender, 1988, 2) she recounts: "The happy, excited voices of the refugees surrounding us fade away. My head suddenly fills with the sounds of other voices: frightened, dazed, angry voices. My mind wanders back to the barbed-wire cage of the Nazi concentration camp in Germany." Once in America, where she arrived in 1950 after the concentration camps and the displaced persons camps, her present blends with her past.

In *The Holocaust Lady* (Sender, 1992, 10) she relates the intertwined realities: "Each time I open my bags, the memories come to life. The people who died appear to plead, to demand, *Speak for us*. Children- blue-eyed, brown-eyed, dark, fair, young and innocent, much like the children before me- whisper, *Tell them about us. Tell them how we lived. Tell them how we hoped. Tell them how we died*". Her mission of telling is explicitly expressed and represented by the dint of de-doubling, a literary device that reflects the twists of consciousness, the de-doubling of life and people as perceived and experienced in the present life.

In her poetics, Sender stresses also the aftermath of the past events on the lives of the survivors and the long-lasting impact on them. Her narration brings back to the world's consciousness the evil perpetuated by the Nazis. It persists in telling the world the atrocities the Nazis inflicted upon her and her people.

According to Kristeva (1980), the obscure and violent revolt of self against what threatens it, resides in the abjection (*Pouvoirs*). The Holocaust life-threatening experience, for too long swallowed finds its way into the consciousness first, in haunting memories, then later in words and wording that vomit the evil, as well as the past existential threat. Turning writing into a belated epistemological and poetical settling of scores with the archetype of evil, the Nazis constitutes the post-abjection of the hellish feminine Holocaust experience.

The binary mode that characterizes Sender's feminine writing's *élan* reflects her experience as well as other Jewish women's ordeal in the camps where she was incarcerated. She was first and foremost a subject and strived very hard to remain as such against all odds. At first, she was treated violently as object and, eventually turned into a mass abject at the hands of the Nazis. In a *tour de force* the survivor's writing re-enacts the resistance, the impulse that vomited the object/ abject imposed on the Jewish feminine self by the very act of narration, which denounces the real abject: the perpetrators.

By telling her past and present experiences in a literary and honest way, Sender undoes the Nazis' attempt to extinguish and dehumanize her and the Jewish people. Instead, she inscribes in her testimonial act the defiance, courage, and hope that constituted her coping strategies in the past. Driven by the will to survive and keep her family united, Sender deconstructs the Nazis' patterns of abject and decay, only to reconstruct them into patterns of hope, defiance and life against all odds. Sender's testimonial act constitutes and eternalizes a resistant feminine Jewish response that rehabilitates her, as well as other Jewish women, and presents it as a resistant Jewish subject capable of accusing the real abject, the Nazis.

The post-abjection of self is acted out and represented in constructs of dehumanization-abject, by which she relates the abject feminine experience of the Holocaust, as well as the rehabilitation of the surviving self. In a compensatory movement, the narrating *I* speaks for itself by reconstructing the subject, proving time and again that *I* is other (*je est un autre*). The feminine Jewish *I* is not abject, but rather a speaking subject.

Moreover, in the belated endeavor to take revenge and to testify and narrate the abject, the feminine *I* is dialectical. *I* is never (one) *I*. It voices not only the unvoiced but also and mainly the other silenced “*I*’s. Drawing its nature and constructs from traumatic memories, the dialectical *I* transcends boundaries of time, and history to narrate *her* story. In this narrative feat, the dialectical *I* stresses its essential dialectical existence with the past, never to be one again. This pattern of *Je est un autre* generates patterns of survivors speaking subjects that defy, transgress, and repudiate the imposed abject and its repercussions on the Jewish feminine *I*. This narration opposes the abject and rejects it. By telling about the Holocaust feminine past experiences, these memoirs constitute the post-abjection of hell, a postponed feminine written spasm to vomit the abject in order to be a subject, once again.

### 3. CONSTRUCT OF ABJECT

The constructs of abject in Ruth Sender’s trilogy mainly embody metamorphosis, homogeneity, and decay, the ultimate abject. They underscore and detail the different stages of the Nazi machinery inflicted upon the Jewish people and unfold the economy of the Nazis’ techniques: metamorphosis and homogeneity of Jewish male and female individuals. These two phases were needed for the Nazis to accomplish their ultimate goal- the extermination of the Jewish people. Bettelheim (1979) claims that the first of the four stages which the Nazis put at work in the camps “centered on the initial shock of finding oneself unlawfully imprisoned” (50). This alone had a great impact on Jewish individuals and undermined their security.

By turning them into objects, i.e. terrorized and degraded subjects, the Nazis could erase every trace of individuality and deal with the disintegrating impact of their strategies on the Jewish individuals. Survivors’ narratives, however, prove the opposite.

Although Sender does not utilize in her memoirs the common structure found in many survivors’ memoirs that start with the delineation of the pre-war period, she offers in her memoirs an outlook on the changes she and her family went through in a representation characterized by the dialectics of trauma. She becomes prey to her own memories that suddenly invade her consciousness.

Suddenly it is 1940 again. I hear the Germans shout. I feel the kick of a German’s boot against my body. I hear my cousin Sabcia scream. I see her perplexed, angry eyes as I fall into the gutter. I see men, women, and children with yellow stars on their clothing herded into the gutter. I hear shots. I hear cries of horror. (Sender, 1988, 56)

Propelled into a universe of continuous terror and existential threat, trying to adjust to the frequent deteriorating changes, she moves from normalcy to a state of extreme temporo-spatial otherness. This state of temporo-spatial otherness will pervade and

accompany her present life, a paradigm rendered in her poetics. Post-war normalcy is redefined in an amalgam of pre-war and Holocaust memories.

The hellish reality, both in the ghettos and later in the camps, is represented in a three-dimensional construct of abject that includes metamorphosis, homogeneity, and decay.

The constructs of abject cover every domain depicted in the life of the Jewish people in the ghettos and in the camps. Sender's narratives render depictions of widespread misery, hunger and disease, as well as human degradation and extermination.

No more factories. No more jobs. Mothers look helpless, with tears in their eyes at the faces of their hungry children. (Sender, 1991, 28)

Their belated impact reverberates, resonates and bleeds into the present, metamorphosing the present into a diachronic reality and re-defining its temporal boundaries.

In *The Holocaust Lady* Sender (1992) depicts an apparently mundane situation, a meeting with her neighbor in America that quickly deteriorates in Sender's consciousness to a diachronic construct of abject:

Berta's eyes look longingly at the baby as she shakes my hand. 'It is nice to have children. We are not that blessed'. I feel her sadness, her emptiness. Suddenly I smell the smoke-filled air of Auschwitz again, the stench of burning flesh. I hear the piercing screams of children being torn away from their mothers. *They took my children from me.* The voice of my friend Tola rings in my ears. ... Mama's tear-strained face flashes before me as she tries to comfort her friend Balchia, whose children were taken during a Nazi raid in the ghetto of Lodz. (38-39)

Berta, Tola, Balchia and Sender's mother are homogenized in the paradigm of Jewish mothers without children. Impacted by the Holocaust experience, Sender's consciousness constitutes an abyssal space where voices and faces from the past live between echoes and reappear as shadows of present figures or events. Though Berta differs and breaks the logic behind the Holocaust paradigm of mothers without children and fits rather the paradigm of women without children, she merges into it by her actual status of feeling emptiness due to her being childless. She undergoes in Sender's consciousness an inter-temporal metamorphosis that allowed homogeneity in the first place.

This inter-temporal metamorphosis frames every prosaic moment in the post-war period back to the Holocaust. On her way to New York, Ruth, a young mother of three children, reacts with anger when approached by an American woman who marvels at her courage to travel from Boston to New-York alone with three children and says that it must be hard on her. "'Children are a blessing, not a trouble. I am very, very lucky to have children.' Screaming mothers, reaching toward children being torn from their arms by the Nazis, flash before me" (Sender, 1992, 50).

This flash resonates and completes the scene of screaming children torn from their mothers; past memories evoked by a conversation and brought to the present by Sender's testimonial act. This scene of Nazi criminal acts is memorized by a witness who captures and conveys the full picture in a fragmented way that reflects the hardcore pattern of

tearing mothers away from their children. Though she didn't experience the events she depicts, they highly impact her and become part of her haunting memories.

According to Charaudeau (2009), in the testimonial narrative an attitude of neutrality requires the absence of any trace of judgment or personal assessment.

This holds for a witness to an attack or an assault. The witness tells us what he saw. In the testimonial act of Holocaust survivors, one cannot expect such an attitude, since the witness is also the victim of the assault. The witness in this case will always bear the attack in his or her memory and will try to repress it or word it. Memory can be a burden or a cage in which the survivor is trapped.

Wording makes way for the self and its revival and purifies it from the abject. As Kristeva (1980, 30) puts it, only words detect and reveal the abject. "I" vomits the abject in order to be itself (21). The testimonial act of Sender also contributes to her rebirth. Through the process of depicting the abject past events, the writing "I" becomes, or in Julia Kristeva's words "in this 'journey'" in which I become, I give birth to myself in the violence of sobbing, of vomit (11).

She rises from the ashes and voices the unvoiced:

Tears glide slowly down my cheeks. I ignore the puzzled look of the lady next to me. ... Now, in a New-York subway, surrendered by strangers, I see the ruins of the ghettos. I see the secret classroom. I feel the agony of the teacher. I hear the words of the poem:

The children,

They are coming.

She counts them.

Oh, better not count,

Twenty perished last night.

Faces flash before my eyes. Faces of my teachers. Faces of my classmates. We were twenty-seven young, blossoming saplings, full of hope for the future. Only four survived. ... Scorched by the flames of death, we rose again. We are here. A new generation is here. (Sender, 1992, 105-106)

Abject memories that burst into the thin layer of Sender's present and invade it can be grouped in the inter-temporal diachronic metamorphosis generated by the paradigm of homogeneity. The present is never present. It is rather absent, elusive, and fragile. Its constituents evoke merely echoes from a past that refuses to pass. Children and adults in America are metamorphosed into Polish Jews persecuted by the Nazis. They are homogenized into a mass abject in the realms of memory, and thrown back into the present, this time as constituents of the past. These figures that are in a permanent state of transformation open through the paradigm of the written post- abjection, a performative act of witnessing. Referring to the listener of the narrative of Holocaust survivors, Michael Levine (2006) talks about opening the chance of "a dialogically transformative encounter" (5). Sender's poetics of the post-abjection of hell offers the reader the chance to transcend time and space and to experience the Holocaust abjection of self in a way that the post-abjection of the abjected *I* becomes diachronic as well as synchronic. The abjection of *I* turns into the post- abjection of *I*'s: survivors, Holocaust victims, as well as non- survivors. "I must tell you that your books, *The Cage* and *To Life*, speak for all the survivors. Your story is our story. The names, the places change. The pain, the horrors

remain the same” (Sender, 1992, 186), or: “I asked many times about the Holocaust and the answer was: it was terrible. You took me by the hand and I walked with you through the horrors. I shared your pain” (181).

This transformative encounter leads to a non-survivor’s “metaleptic gesture,” as a compensatory act to the post-abjection of *I* rendered in *The Cage*, as reported by Sender (1992) in *The Holocaust Lady*:

Sister Margaret, the principal, walks up and stands beside me. In her hand, she holds an orange. She looks at me with tears in her eyes. ‘This morning, as I was about to fix my lunch for work, I put my hand in the refrigerator to take out an orange. I stopped. I remembered the scene in your book, when your little brothers sold their rations of bread to get one tangerine on the black market. ... She puts the orange in my hand. I know this orange comes much, much too late to help. It is only to show that I care’. (183-184)

Transcending and blurring time and the boundaries of space, this gesture underscores the diachronic and synchronic paradigms constructed in the interaction between the abject diegetic situation and the reader.

#### 4. DE-STRUCTURING LOSS

Being an inherent part of the Holocaust experience, the death of beloved ones constitutes an overwhelming abyss. Death is also the ultimate form of abject the Jewish prisoners were confronted with daily. The cadaver, according to Kristeva (1980), “shatters violently the identity of the person confronted with it. ... Waste, as well as the cadaver, indicates to me what I permanently push aside to live” (11).

Living through the Holocaust means being constantly confronted with cadavers, decay, death. This recurrent blunt encounter with death blurs the boundaries between the polarities: death vs life. Consequently, it gives rise to a special existential reaction that defies the Nazis’ plans: cadavers are not pushed aside. On the contrary, they constitute the *raison d’être* of survival. They are an integral part of life and are never to be forgotten. The cadavers, the fundamental reminders of death and extinction, become for the Jewish prisoners a stimulus of life, a vow for revenge and survival. The cadavers pledge life and resistance, turning (their own) loss into a transcendental spasm.

Ruth Sender’s trilogy not only de-structures loss but also re-structures it. Contrary to Kristeva’s theory regarding the confrontation with the cadaver, Sender fills the gap left by the tragic death of her loved ones by turning their absence into presence. In other words, she doesn’t expel the cadavers from her life, but rather retains them in her memory and allows room for them in her life. Moreover, she gives them life and a voice, as well as a prominent part in her present. Her memory constitutes an a-temporal space where the dead move freely between the different periods and people transcend space and time. Their mental presence constitutes an unfettered source of strength and life. The pattern of absence vs presence has been instilled in her by Sender’s mother, namely, by her constructive response to the death of her husband who left her with seven young children. The mother then was proactive and ran her husband’s factory in order to provide for the needs of her children. She courageously raised her children, overcoming

her own distress and embracing them with love, hope and joy. “Her song and the sound of the sewing machine ring happily all through the house” (Sender, 1991, 6). Sender’s mother molded the mind-set of her children, filling the abyss existence brought about with the opposite patterns: love, hope and joy. Her resilience and coping strategies will be engraved in Sender’s soul and help her later to cope with the atrocities in the Holocaust. Nacha, Sender’s mother put at work what Dimsdale (1980) calls active hope. Not only did she pull her seven orphaned children out of the disaster of losing their father by replacing his loss with hope and life, but she also gave them an example of dealing with loss by resisting it; and defying its devastating repercussions on their souls and lives. Her response de-structured loss and its implications on the fragile souls of her children. Furthermore, Nacha reinforced her attitude toward loss by voicing time and again her philosophy to her children, “as long as there is life, there is hope”. This precious mantra will prove to be the main avenue for defiance and survival for her daughter. The devastating absence of the mother is replaced by her mental presence in the mind of her daughter. Nacha transcends the limits of the cadaver and finitude only to settle forever in the realms of amplitude that spiritual resistance offers. She continues to live in her daughter’s mind and memories. She guides her when the latter is forced by the atrocious events of the Holocaust to take up her role after Nacha was taken to her death by the Nazis. From the alleged abject Jewish woman gassed by the Nazis in Chelmnno, she turns out to be the powerful, tremendous, and resourceful maternal eternal presence that will help defy and resist her daughter’s constant existential threat, bringing her strong and resilient to the safe harbor of life in America.

Furthermore, despite her young age, Riva-Ruth adopts her mother’s qualities as a woman and as a mother when Nacha is deported because of her illness. Being suddenly the sole provider of the family, Riva re-enacts the sacrificial and devoted role her mother once displayed until her tragic death. Determined to fill the abyss for her little brothers, despite her own feelings of despair, she becomes a source of comfort, warmth, and courage. “I put my arms around him, (Laibele) pressing him rightly to me. ‘Cry, darling, cry.’ With his hot tears pouring over my face, I know I am no longer a sixteen-year-old girl. I am a mother now” (Sender, 1991, 39).

Later, she fights against the ghetto Child Welfare Department that found it necessary to put each child in a proper home. “I look at Laibele, and Mama’s pleading eyes are before me. I hear a voice within me crying, *A mother does not give up her children! A mother does not give up her children!*” I look at her (social worker) and the anger rises to my voice: “Don’t try to break our hearts again. You will not separate us. Please leave us alone!” (Sender, 1991, 55). She fights for adoption and eventually wins the battle. Riva, like her mother, is proactive. In the face of her mother’s loss, she instinctively puts at work the pattern of motherhood to fill the void in the life of her brothers. Her mother’s absence is replaced by the continuation and the presence of her characteristics displayed by the daughter in the parentless structure they live in.

The paradigm of presence restructures lost life even years after the Holocaust. Riva’s brothers and her mother accompany her and are an inherent part of her present. Their mental presence ‘reiterates’ their lives in different moments throughout the years.

My mother, my brothers appear before my eyes and vanish just as quickly” (Sender, 1992, 16). In *To Life*, “The faces of my brothers Motele and Moishele float before me. Tears stream down my face. They, too, swallowed by a crowd, disappeared from my

side. They never came back. (89)... I still hear Motele's voice. *You must be strong. We must live. We must survive.* I never saw them again (190).

Their reiterated presence in Riva's memory and present constitutes what Dominick La Capra, quoted in Levine (2006), called a re-petition. The petition of the dead is for bearing witness and *telling the world*, as well as re-structuring life in such a way that the past will never pass and be forgotten, or in Sender's words: "We must learn from the past to have a future" (Sender, 1992, 188)<sup>2</sup>.

The cadavers, by their stubborn insistence on the past invading the present of another world, reshape both space and time. They constitute what the survival *I* pushes ahead to live a better life.

## 5. HOPE AND RESISTANCE

Hope and resistance are intertwined in the experience of Ruth Sender. These daring and bold attitudes adopted by Riva in the darkest time of human history helped in thwarting the Nazis' plans to exterminate her and beat her. They articulate mental states of transition and transformation, turning the archetypal construct of abject into archetypal constructs of life and movement. As such, they also constitute an unfettered source of resistance and survival. As mentioned previously, the example inculcated by Riva's mother who fortunately highly impacted her daughter's defiant reactions to overwhelming events in life had paved her way to life.

Interrelated hope and resistance, as it appears in the trilogy of Sender, dismantle patterns of despair and catastrophe and transcend the actual moment or situation by mentally metamorphosing it into an ephemeral one in the first plane, and in the second plane by transposing into it positive elements of future or past events. This reconstruction of the present, by rejecting the present (event/situation) and mentally altering its constructs and constituents, draws its source from the human ability to surpass the present and restructure it as though it were an artifact. This 'mental artifact' becomes very powerful and transformative because of its power to lift not only the spirits of the subjects involved, but also to detach them temporally from the threatening present and turn it into an ephemeral, fading moment.

Riva used her gift for writing in the camps to help her inmates transcend the excruciating present in the camps. She writes a poem which she reads aloud on Christmas day, in a show the Commandant asked the prisoners to organize. Her poem has a tremendous impact on four hundred inmates and even on the Nazi commandment. This event is related in *The Cage* (Sender, 1991, 231-233):

A message for Mama  
 Blue little clouds, floating so free  
 Won't you please carry a message for me  
 If on your journey you should  
 Happen to see

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<sup>2</sup> In America, Ruth Sender has dedicated her life to enhancing tolerance and acceptance of others.

My mother.  
 Tired, weary, left all alone  
 Torn from her children  
 filled with sorrow and pain.  
 Please, gently touch her  
 Please, gently kiss her  
 Bring her my love.  
 .....  
 Tell her soon. Soon will come the day  
 When together again  
 Together again we will be.  
 A mother, her children- a family  
 all free!  
 .....  
 Tomorrow is near  
 Dear Mama, please live!  
 Be strong  
 We'll weather this storm.  
 We'll find you, dear Mama  
 Please, do not despair  
 We will live!  
 We will live to be free!

In this message for her mother, Riva restructures the mindset of the four hundred miserable inmates, pulling them out of their desperate present and bringing them into a mentally better setting, a future one. She sets in their minds the long-lost freedom, depicting a natural setting of normalcy: floating clouds above the camp. She also re-inserts lost patterns of family reunion, wholeness, and plenitude, reuniting broken worlds and mending broken hearts and souls. The poem also re-installs patterns of love, a mother's warmth, and most of all, survival and triumph.

Surprisingly, the poem has the power also to deconstruct the sadistic Commandant's mindset and transform it. She is moved by the lyrics and by their emotional content. She is suddenly metamorphosed into a human being awestruck by the emotions displayed in the poem of the Jewish prisoner: "I was sure that we killed all your emotions, that all you can feel is hunger, all you can think of is bread." She stops looking away. "Your poems are full of hope, of love. You still feel. You still dream. You yearn for your mother. You reminded me that I, too, have a mother" (Sender, 1991, 234).

Interwoven hope and resistance represented in the poem subvert the Nazi order in the mind of the Nazi commandant. They juxtapose a Nazi commandant and Jewish prisoners, stressing the common human aspect and momentarily undoing the Nazi racial theory. A Nazi commandant and dehumanized Jewish prisoners are suddenly, once again, all daughters of mothers and yearn for their mothers. Hope and resistance have the power to

blur roles and status-boundaries, as well as any Nazi order and ideology. Both sides of the wary and hostile equation are suddenly equal and positioned on the same side<sup>3</sup>.

In the face of death hovering above her and her inmates, Riva rebels when she sees “the ditches flowing with young blood,” her reaction being to protest. Knowing that she risks her life, she puts the shovel into the ground in silent protest, ignoring the guard above her (Sender, 1991, 252). She is beaten and faints, slipping into the mud. Assisted by her friend, she swallows her tears and “digs again.” Bombs are falling all around them, and Nazi soldiers remind them that “the bombs do not mean the end of Germany; they mean the end of the Jews” (253). Riva’s reaction to this message of death and finitude is hope; she draws her reaction from her mother, “I hear Mama’s voice: as long as there is life, there is hope. As long as there is life....” (253). This message of hope, as an inner voice, thwarts and defies the outer Nazi, hostile voice that keeps reminding the Jewish prisoners, “you are digging your own grave.” Hope, as a counter pattern used against all odds, reconstructs the encounter with imminent death and existential threat and turns it into a power struggle between two different forces: the physical Nazi force and the Jewish spiritual force. The latter contradicts and opposes the master-slave dialectic and dismantles it. The Jewish prisoner reacts as a free subject able to reject by the dint of spiritual strength not only the objectivation imposed on her, but also to defy the abject state and reverse it. She becomes once again a determined subject capable of turning the experience of dehumanization and abjection inflicted on her into an experience non-identical to the self. The spiritual strength splits this experience of abject into two essentially non-identical experiences. As a result, the condition of abject is perceived only by the Nazi soldier and experienced differently by the Jewish subject. A new dialectic sets in the Nazi soldier is experienced as the real abject by the prisoner as a free subject. Both are non-identical to their roles in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. Consequently, the Nazi order and logic are subverted and reversed. “We must survive, Karola. We must survive. I raise my voice. We must hope. As long as there is life, there is hope” (Sender, 1991, 254). The dialectic will eventually be undone by the Russians. “In the silence, the soldier’s agitated outcry echoes loudly and clearly. ‘The Russians are behind us! The Russians are behind us!’ The guards stay frozen for a moment. Then, crazed by the news, they take off, leaving us standing on the road, bewildered” (256-257).

## 6. RECONSTRUCTING LIFE

Reconstructing life for Holocaust survivors means more than returning to normalcy. It means on a first level re-structuring patterns of thinking and being free subjects, and on a second level re-structuring patterns of living. The representation of the re-adaptation to freedom, as well as to imminent existential threat-free life in the work of Ruth Sender in *To Life* (1988) and *The Holocaust Lady* (1992) relies on the past-present dialectic based on the paradigm of dual-abjection. The journey back to life and freedom starts with petrification and perplexity in the face of the old/ new human condition. It is represented

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<sup>3</sup> Bosmajian (2012) in *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature*, observes that the sudden sentimentality of the commandant is typical of Nazis who defined their victims as subhuman and simultaneously could claim “I am no murderer” (151-178).

as a 'trans-phase' endowed with Nazi concentration camp abject paradigms of behavior, on the one hand, and reemerging subject paradigms of thinking, on the other. In *The Cage*, Sender (1991) eternalizes this transitive moment, her portrayal documenting the shock of recognition of the old/new human condition of freedom preceded by the deconstruction of the subject/object Nazi paradigm, doubled by the juxtaposition of two opposite successive scenes that reflect the inverted roles and reversed situations. "The woods are before us. The first rows are about to enter." (The guard) "Forget about the Jews. Run, save your own life" (256- 257). To this, the Jewish prisoners react, "Girls! Girls, we are free! Free!" The Nazi subject becomes instantly the abject, the one who breaks the law, disturbs the order, disrupts the system, and above all, the one who must flee for his life. Furthermore, the Nazi abject is threatened and disarmed not only of its arms, but also of his being an evil subject. He is a fugitive, a historical abject, accused of turning the Jewish human condition into abject in the eyes of history, as well as in her story. "Slowly, we drag ourselves back, back to the open gates of the cage. ... We lie on the sacks of straw, too weak, too numb to move. The gates are open, but no one leaves. We wait. If our liberators come, we will be here waiting for them (258). The powerful moment of liberation is lived in a state of shock of recognition of the long-forgotten free subject. Back in control of its life, the newly 'redefined' Jewish subject makes its own decision, "We will be here waiting for them." This decision is the outcome of a previous experience of getting no help from people living in the surroundings of the concentration camp: "No one opens the door. They are hiding from us" (258).

These scenes are recounted at length in the book *To Life*. The deconstruction of the Nazis' paradigms of power and evil is represented and intensified by the following scene, when, soon afterward, the Jewish prisoners were suddenly left in the woods without guards and went back as free persons to the camp. "Then we hear (sic) shouts and screams coming from the barracks. Some girls drag out a German guard. He was hiding under a bed of straw. 'Please, girls, please. Please do not hand me over to the Russians. They will kill me.' He falls to his knees, crying, pleading. 'I only followed orders. Please, please, save me. I am not guilty. I only followed orders'" (Sender, 1988, 8-9).

Frameworks are ruptured. Once again. Jewish Prisoners are free. Through the eyes of the Nazi guard, they are suddenly bestowed with a power they do not comprehend or that can even be processed after years of imprisonment, starvation, torture, and omnipresent death. Their torturers and perpetrators plead for their lives. New paradigms of thinking are thrown at them without warning. The demystification of the Nazi power is followed by Sender's reflection on the absurd situation in the concentration camp cruelly guarded by Nazis only hours ago. "Without his rifle, without his whip, he is [a] pathetic, miserable creature. We are his victims. We are his jury. We are his judges. His life is in our hands now" (9). Roles, definitions, dialectics, and Aryan theories all collapse and are dismantled. Boundaries are blurred, as well as Nazi paradigms of power. As Hela says, once out of the concentration camp, while walking on the sidewalk of a German town, without Germans. "We are human beings again". (15)

Jewish lives are reconstructed; first, by picking up the pieces, by collecting lost names from survivors from the multiple concentration camps, lost Jewish objects, lost pictures, and books from the Polish invaders to Jewish homes. "The cabinet is filled with silver goblets and silver candlesticks. She (Karola) takes a goblet in her hand. "It has Hebrew writing!" She cries out. 'This comes from a Jewish home!'.... The apartment is filled with the plundered remains of Jewish homes. (Sender, 1988, 51).

The remnants of destroyed Jewish lives will forever be a metonymic monumental memory. "I hold a goblet in my shaking hands, touching it gently. This beautiful silver goblet was used to celebrate holidays, to welcome the Sabbath. It speaks of joyous occasions. Of families. Where are they, those people who held this goblet raised in a blessing?" (Sender, 1988, 51). In the aftermath of the Holocaust, piles of objects bewail the absence of their owners and inscribe in their presence the tragedy of the Holocaust. They plead for revenge, as well as remembrance of their owners. Reconstructing life for survivors is first and foremost based on the vow to reconstruct the lost lives of six million Jews by dint of the testimonial act. Though their presence is, by definition, mediated by words, memory, history, and names given to future generations, it resonates their abyssal absence. Memory, the a-temporal space that allows an ever-reiterating presence, 'reactivates' their presence. Memory conditions the present of the survivors who are required to re-adjust to post-war life. Words, concepts, and life are shadowed by the Holocaust experiences, which instill an everlasting discrepancy between the past and the present. When Riva and Moniek are assigned a room in the displaced persons camp to be shared with another couple and their child, Riva's reaction is joy and awe. "The last time I saw a Jewish child was when they were ordered to go to the left in Auschwitz. Those children all perished in the Nazi gas chambers. Still, there is a Jewish child in this camp. A Jewish child who survived. I feel like shouting, *A Jewish child! A Jewish child!*" (Sender, 1988, 71-72).

The Jewish child in the displaced persons camp is endowed with Jewish triumph over the Nazis. He constitutes in the postwar Jewish economy the living referent to one million children who were gassed and murdered by the Nazis. "I see the children's intense stares, and pictures of cattle cars flash before my eyes. ... I see the terrified eyes of my younger brothers, Motele, sixteen, Moishle, thirteen, as we enter the gates of hell, Auschwitz" (Sender, 1992, 12).

Every Jewish child born after the Holocaust will constitute not only a Jewish living victory, but also the counterbalance of the Holocaust experience of death and abject. "Suddenly I gasp: 'Today is August 27? Moniek, Cima. I stop to catch my breath. Is it possible? Is it August 27?' They stare at me. 'Yes, it is,' they reply in one voice. On August 27, 1944, I arrived in the cattle cars at the gates of hell- Auschwitz. Two years ago, today, I was sent to die. Yet I lived and gave birth to a child. A Jewish child. August 27. It is a miracle. A miracle" (Sender, 1988, 119-120).

For Riva, the language system is forever transformed: the sign and its referent will be, by definition, permeated and mediated by the Holocaust experience. The Holocaust experience interferes with the relation between the sign and its referent and screens it. The referent will be preceded by a 'Holocaust' referent positioned in memory as a living referent of past events. On her first day in America in 1950, Riva and her husband, with their two children, meet for the first time her husband's family. Her husband's cousin, Minnie "walks (Riva) to the table, laden with breads, cheeses, and pastries. 'Eat, eat.' I see the hungry eyes of my little brothers, Motele, Labele, and Moishle. I hear Laibele's voice. Someday we will all be together at a table with bread, and will eat, eat, eat until we can eat no more" (Sender, 1992, 30).

The dialectic between past and present extends to the future and is situated in the paradigm of bearing witness. Moreover, through the names of the beloved persons from the past given to the next generation, the past is reconstructed, transposed into new frames of space, time, and life. Still, the names are required to adjust to their new settings

and be doubled by American names. The clerk at the Immigration and Naturalization Office suggests that they add new names to make life easier in America. "Laibele could be Louis. Avromele, Allen. You're not taking away their Yiddish names. You are adding American names. They are the names of people you loved, people who died, people who live on only in their names" (Sender, 1992, 34). Endowed with a new frame of life, the Yiddish names are projected into the future in a way that stretches the past into the present and the future. Furthermore, interpellated, the present names 're-transcribe' the trajectory of the Yiddish names and lives in a new setting, positioning them in the American context as free subjects.

I stop, stare at the street where many Jewish families once made their homes. They all vanished. I try to recall Rutka's (Riva's cousin) happy laughter, the sound of her childish voice as she walked to the park, securely holding her mother's and father's hands. The sound, like the child, cannot be brought back. I wipe tears from my face. I'll make her name live on by calling myself Ruth, the mature form of Rutka. Riva, Ruth. (*The Holocaust Lady*, 34- 35).

The reconstruction of life also passes through the reconstruction of the lost Yiddish culture. Riva's brother-in-law, Joseph, who used to perform on a Yiddish stage before the Holocaust, forms a Jewish theatre in the displaced persons camp to lift the spirits of the survivors: "Through plays and songs from our past, we will draw the strength to build a future" (Sender, 1988, 147).

In the same displaced persons camp, Riva teaches the few children who survived the war. She uses the same strategy with the young generation. She teaches them Yiddish songs to bring smiles back to their faces. The diachronic encounter with the children in the displaced persons camp places in the present the dead children in the ghetto. "I look at the pale, solemn faces, the bewildered eyes, and I see again the children of the ghetto" (Sender, 1988, 143).

Using the Yiddish language, Riva rehabilitates the Jewish identity and presents it rather as a proud Jewish subject. She teaches them a song: "I am a Jewish child, I sing a Yiddish song. I am. I am. I am. I am a Jewish child." Loaded with a rich cultural history, the Yiddish language serves as a performative instrument to 'reconstruct' the Jewish subject referred to as abject during the Holocaust. The simple words redefine the Jewish subject and stress the living Jewish "I," as well. Past and present are interrelated to help survivors be of abject born.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Ruth Sender's experience in the Holocaust and in America, as rendered in her trilogy, *The Cage, To Life* and *The Holocaust Lady*, weaves in a special poetics the surge of life, nurtured by her mother's strength and role modeling encapsulated in the mother's credo, "as long as there is life, there is hope." This surge of life eventually combats any disheartening experience and equips her with resistance and courage. Her accounts set forth a settling of scores with the Nazis and their collaborators and redeem the Jewish feminine self. Sender's writing is characterized by a binary mode that juxtaposes

polarities: Nazis and Jewish prisoners, superior human beings and inferior human beings doomed to death, past and present, abject and subject, absence and presence, life and death. Her writing delineates not only survival strategies but also defiance. Sender undoes the Nazis' paradigms of abject by using the same paradigms to redefine the real abject. She utilizes the Nazis' constructs of abject, i.e., metamorphosis, homogeneity, and decay, to subvert the Nazis' strategies and to prove that the Jewish feminine *I* is not abject, but rather a subject that was dehumanized, defeminized, abused, and murdered by sadistic Nazis. Against all odds, this abused subject that speaks also for the dead is capable of rising from the ashes unto a new life, transforming from abject to subject and accusing the real abject, the Nazis, of breaking the law, the social order, and the system. Contrary to Kristeva's theory regarding the abject and abjection, Sender urges the cadavers onward into existence and into life. The cadavers do not menace her. They do not invade her being, nor do they threaten her identity. She embraces them and lives to remember and voice them. The post-abjection of hell permits the rebirth and the redefining of the Jewish feminine *I*, and also the restoration of order.

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