

Echoes of the Holocaust: Female Survival in *I Who Have Never Known Men*

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ABSTRACT

Author Jacqueline Harpman, who spent her childhood as a refugee fleeing Nazi persecution, wrote *I Who Have Never Known Men* in 1995. The novel follows the story of a girl growing up in captivity as she discovers what it means to be human through the guidance and strength of her fellow female inmates despite their bleak circumstances. By examining passages from Harpman's novel and historical accounts of life under Nazi occupation, this essay argues that Harpman in her novel pulls from testimonies and personal experience to intentionally parallel the female experience of the Holocaust. Further, Harpman's purpose behind crafting these similarities reflects her views on the patriarchy's threat to human survival, and how women's efforts towards community building and emotional endurance make women crucial to the continuance of a human race that has been compromised by patriarchal ideologies throughout history.

Jewish author and psychoanalyst Jacqueline Harpman was born in Etterbeek, Belgium in 1929, and fled to North Africa with her family to escape Nazi persecution as a young girl (Harpman 175). In 1995, she published the novel *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes*, which has since been translated into English by Ros Schwartz under the title *I Who Have Never Known Men*. The story follows a young nameless female narrator as she grows up in an underground prison with thirty-nine older women. The group is strictly monitored by male guards who impose a rigid and dehumanizing structure upon them. With no memories of the world before her captivity, the narrator grows up figuring out her identity under the influence of her fellow inmates in an environment that seeks to deprive her of humanity. An inherently philosophical novel, *I Who Have Never Known Men* explores female-specific gendered trauma and gendered coping mechanisms, bears direct witness to the lives of Jewish women in Europe and throughout concentration camps during the Holocaust as they were subjected to the authority of a patriarchic Nazi regime. The female experience of trauma as a result of male abuse of power in *I Who Have Never Known Men* directly parallels Holocaust testimonies, suggesting that Harpman's perspective as a female Jewish refugee informs her beliefs about survival – particularly her conviction that the human race is threatened by the patriarchy and instead must be sustained through the emotional and communal endurance displayed by women in hardship. For Harpman, the female sex is essential to the preservation of humanity in the face of patriarchal goals.

Gender in Europe

The dystopian world Harpman crafts in *I Who Have Never Known Men* displays clear traces of early twentieth century Europe in context of the Holocaust, equally capturing both European gender roles and the desolation of ethnic cleansing. Preceding the war, Jewish men and women followed traditional gender patterns across Europe, which led to separate gender spheres wherein women's education and social networks were limited, culminating in fewer non-Jewish connections for women to protect them during Nazi persecution (Ofer and Weitzman). In some areas of Eastern Europe, gender roles were less rigidly divided, allowing women more avenues for economic and educational opportunities, which provided them with more connections for protection and escape during the war. Women were also at higher risk for persecution. Early in the war, it was common belief among Jews that the Germans would not harm women and children; therefore men were given priority in plans for hiding and exit visas, which led to a disproportionate representation of women in deportations to Auschwitz (Ofer and Weitzman).

In her novel, Harpman parallels early twentieth century European culture and gender dynamics in the stories women share with the narrator about their lives. All but one of the forty women are uneducated, and all come from backgrounds as either stay-at-home mothers, retail and factory workers, or waitresses, similar to women in early twentieth century Europe (Harpman 70). The lack of education among female inmates in the novel could suggest one of two things: that vulnerable women with limited social spheres were intentionally targeted, or that educated women had more resources to escape persecution, leaving mostly uneducated women to fall victim to the unknown forces that imprisoned them. Another element suggesting the novel intentionally imitates the Holocaust is the methods by which the women were forcibly taken from their homes and imprisoned. The women vaguely recall recent political tensions and war preceding a night of terror, fire, stampedes, and screams wherein they were stolen from their homes, drugged, and placed inside the underground prison (Harpman 46-47), which is directly reminiscent of Kristallnacht. During their time in the bunker, the women are surveilled by male guards, suggesting a continuance of a male-dominated structure that governed their lives before, much like how Nazism was characterized by its patriarchal values – “A second difference in the German treatment of men and women was their consistent (and traditional) pattern of delegating leadership roles to men” (Ofer & Weitzman).

Setting and the Concentration Camp

The bleakness of the novel's setting additionally carries heavy connotations that Susan Bainbrige explores in her 2010 article on literary fantasy and setting liminality in Harpman's work. The flat world setting the women find themselves in after escaping the bunker is intentionally despairing. It is marked with sparse vegetation and homogeny among what little plant life there is. The stars in the sky form no familiar constellation and the seasons never change as the women come to understand they are the only people alive on this terrain. The women have little reference to understand their land, which is deprived of most of the life that would be found on Earth, and each insight they gain breeds more confusion than it does answers, with the narrator even equating their environment to "...a new prison" (Harpman 63). The women can find no escape, and they are forced to continue living without true freedom until they all die out. Bainbrige equates Harpman's bleak landscape and structure with the guards as being "...more in common with the universe of the concentration camp than that of the fantasy novel" (Bainbrige 1015-1016). This otherness of setting reflects the absence of humanity found in the goals of Nazism, which Harpman experienced firsthand living as a refugee in Casablanca as a young girl, which she parallels through the narrator's isolation; the novel even begins with the narrator being approximately the same age Harpman was when her family fled Europe. While Harpman did not experience life in the concentration camps, she personally felt the impacts of the genocide of Jewish people, giving her an understanding of what it's like to be denied identity and means of survival, which thematically defines *I Who Have Never Known Men*.

It is certain that in her return to Europe and the half-century that elapsed between World War II and the publication of her novel, Harpman encountered concentration camp survivors and heard their testimonies, as well as likely lost family and friends during the Holocaust, giving her an even deeper understanding of life in concentration camps to inform her novel. Her participation in a communal pain and healing of Jewish survivors following the war arguably shaped her thinking about the essential needs of human survival, where emotional endurance and collective actions guide our persistence as a species. Her perspective as a woman subjected to the inconceivable harms of the patriarchal Nazi regime perhaps influenced a guiding belief that, under threat of survival, women focus more on sustaining emotional relationships and nourishing collective needs rather than violence and self-preservation. The mental perseverance demonstrated by the female community as they die out due to circumstances constructed by authoritarian males in Harpman's novel reflects her views about the necessities of human survival in the face of horrors created by fellow man. With this, it can be said that the Holocaust perpetually lingers in the background of this text, not as a ghost, but as a solid and present authority which dictates Harpman's construction of the novel, where she echoes the past of a patriarchally-ordained species genocide. The depravity created by men in Harpman's novel demands her exploration of the possibilities of human survival and flourishing in female communities which she illustrates as better equipped to meet human needs and sustain our survival as a collective species.

Gendered Trauma

While men and women were often subjected to the same kinds of harassment in labor and death camps, the female perspective interpreted some acts of humiliation and degradation differently due to cultural expectations of sexual violence towards women. Though men and women both were forced to strip in front of male guards, this produced far more fear and humiliation for women socialized in a culture of modesty and expectations of sexual assault (Ofer & Weitzman). The women in the novel are dehumanized by the male guards in a panoptic cage where they are forced to bathe and use the bathroom in plain sight, which is especially degrading in the male-female power dynamic where sexual exploitation and abuse is an underlying fear and expectation. They face further dehumanization and gendered trauma by not being provided menstrual products or underwear, forcing them to designate a portion of the fabric they are given for collecting blood, which they must painfully and awkwardly hold between their legs during their cycles, while also maintaining careful effort not to bleed onto their mattresses (Harpman 6). The trauma they face is distinctly gendered; while the intention behind the guards' treatment of them

may not be aimed at their womanhood, it is clear that their needs as women are not a consideration of the male authority binding them to the cage that otherwise feeds and clothes them, evidencing a clear patriarchal power that neglects (or actively dismisses) female needs and perspectives. Through these details, Harpman highlights her argument that patriarchies impede human survival because they fail to view women as human.

Sexual trauma also plays a powerful role in Holocaust testimony. Laura Miñano Mañero discusses the haunting subtext of gendered abuse that is often unvoiced in the corpus of female Holocaust testimony. She describes textual and figurative silence and unreadability regarding gendered and sexual trauma that occurred during the Holocaust as a sanctuary wherein female Jewish survivors could protect themselves from the pain inflicted upon their bodies by the Nazis (Mañero 190-191). Harpman integrates this silence as a response to gendered trauma into *I Who Have Never Known Men* within two contexts: sex and motherhood. In their environment that is utterly absent of empirical reason, the women contemplate the purpose behind their captivity. Understanding the dynamic of being in a cage full of women of mostly child-bearing age guarded by all men, the women conjecture they are on reserve to be used for an unknown purpose, which connotatively reads as a reproductive objective that would, by default, demand sexual violence. Given their unspoken understanding, the women elect to not teach the narrator about sex, perhaps as a means to not clue the narrator into a collective fear of being kept for purposes of breeding. Some of the women gesture they do not teach her about sex because the narrator will never experience it therefore there is no reason she should know about it, while also maintaining a faux power dynamic over the narrator as gatekeepers of “forbidden” knowledge (Harpman 8). The character of Anthea is the only woman who acts as an educator for the narrator and elaborates on the role of silence the women employed in raising her – “...we got into the habit of never going over our memories with you, we thought it would be bad for you” (Harpman 29).

It is evident that the women raising the narrator recognized the potential to inflict pain upon her by telling her about things she would never experience, which would additionally protect her from experiencing gendered trauma. By growing up without knowledge of the potential for sexual violence, and finding the circumstances the women are subjected to as normal, the narrator is allowed to grow up almost androgynously – absent of the female perspective that would have likely made her time in the bunker more traumatic for her.

Beyond silence on the subject of sex, silence on motherhood is an even more glaring choice by the women in the novel. During the Holocaust, women and children were often the first to be executed at concentration camps, sometimes with mothers being among the few granted the choice to either endure slave labor or die alongside her children. Jewish women additionally were forcibly sterilized, and pregnant women were either killed or forced to have abortions in order to survive (“Motherhood | Spots of Light: Women in the Holocaust”). Most of the women in the bunker are mothers; however, they do not speak of their children and often shunned the narrator while she was young: “...They resented my being there alive while they had no idea what had happened to their own daughters” (Harpman 19). The silence the women both give to the narrator and have about their own children acts as their way of protecting themselves from the pain of acknowledging their children are likely either dead or also locked in a cage somewhere – “They don’t want to think about their children” (Harpman 101).

The severed connection between mothers and their children adds an additional layer of gendered trauma the women endure in the novel. Their shunning towards the narrator and silence on motherhood is not the women’s means of diminishing their love for their children but is their way of enduring the daily pain they feel of not being able to protect their young, reflecting the difficult choices mothers faced during the Holocaust. “Some mothers, impelled by the survival instinct, made decisions or took actions that clashed with the accepted social norms that govern the mother-child relationship” (“Motherhood | Spots of Light: Women in the Holocaust”). The gendered trauma that women endure is a result of the absence of space patriarchies hold for them. Harpman’s perspective as a woman whose girlhood fell victim to and whose remaining life was defined by patriarchal Nazism informs this novel heavily, with the trauma women faced during the Holocaust being paralleled in *I Who Have Never Known Men*. These intentional parallels,

particularly in the treatment of the female inmates by the guards, support Harpman's assertion that systems that do not accommodate the needs and perspectives of women are extremely flawed, as to do so would deny that women are human. In the novel, the female perspective becomes the forefront of how the inmates endure survival and raise the narrator – protecting her from gendered trauma while also maintaining silence about their own. Harpman ultimately argues with *I Who Have Never Known Men* that the female perspective, perhaps influenced by its endurance through gendered trauma, possesses a unique understanding about what is needed to survive, and that power-hungry men, who continually orchestrate genocides, whether through the Holocaust or by placing the population in underground bunkers to die, do not hold a perspective equipped to maintain the endurance of humanity as a whole.

Gendered Coping Mechanisms

While the women's trauma characterizes the inability of a male-centered power structure to sustain human needs and survival, the women's response to that trauma through gendered coping mechanisms evidences the ability of women to survive despite these difficult circumstances, suggesting women possess an understanding of human needs that allow them to survive both physically and mentally in the face of depravity. The ways the novel's women cope with their circumstances are arguably gendered or are at least informed by a female perspective that continually focuses on a collective survival rather than individual. The structures the women create and maintain in their captivity all revolve around the preservation of humanity and cohesion of a community that mirrors the gendered coping mechanisms Jewish women upheld during the Holocaust. As a response to the depravity found in labor and death camps, women responded uniquely from men by making efforts towards their personal hygiene, sewing new clothes to fit their bodies, and sharing recipes to cope with their hunger (Ofer & Weitzman). These things are all similarly done by the women in *I Who Have Never Known Men*. The women wash themselves with what little soap they are given and teach the narrator how to wash her genitals properly, demonstrating a continued effort to keep their bodies clean among dehumanizing conditions and extending that humanity to the narrator to protect her womanhood. They similarly assert power over their bodies by sewing together; one of the distinctions between humans and animals is clothing, thereby when the women choose to create and wear clothing under the scrutiny of the male guards, the women are not only restoring dignity stolen from them in their lack of privacy but are asserting that they are human. The lack of dignity afforded to them by the male guards is reinforced by the fact they must distribute a portion of their fabric scraps to create sanitary rags as the men otherwise do not provide them any (Harpman 22), leaving the rest of what they are given to have a sense of sacredness in their function of providing the women a sense of privacy and ownership over their bodies when they otherwise do not possess such authority and autonomy. This makes their act of collective sewing a powerful coping mechanism of their mental survival and assertion of their humanity, much like women during the Holocaust managed to do. While the women in the novel are never hungry like those in concentration camps, they still are similarly starving within their souls under their bleak circumstances. Despite this, the women continue to talk and nourish their relationships with one another through conversation, even if it is quite pointless. "Listening to their chatter, I was amazed – anyone would think they had the choice between several recipes and a variety of seasonings, whereas in fact they only had three large pots and water... I was surprised at how much they had to say, the passion with which they repeated the same thing in ten different ways so as to avoid accepting that they'd had absolutely nothing to say to one another for ages. But human beings need to speak, otherwise they lose their humanity" (Harpman 20-21). With their actions, which extend beyond the needs of physical survival, Harpman argues here that there exists a mental survival distinct from the needs of the body. While one can subsist on only nourishment of the physical, as the unknown patriarchal authority asserts by providing the women with food, shelter, and clothing, it is dehumanizing to live off only the means to sustain the body. To counteract this structure of survival imposed on them, the women create functions to support a mental survival that focuses on nourishing a community and restoring the humanity stripped from

them by the men.

This novel further imitates the circumstances of female survival during the Holocaust through the women's relationships paralleling *Lagerschwester* or "camp sisters." *Lagerschwester* were close-knit communities of women that bonded with each other for assistance and strength in concentration camps; there is no equivalent term for men (Ofer & Weitzman). In the novel, once the women are free from the bunker and are allowed to touch each other and express emotions, the women form groups and couples, including one polyamorous triad (Harpman 105). The women create these sisterhoods and lesbian relationships to sustain their needs of emotional connection; maintaining relationships between each other asserts their humanity, such that they are human beings to be acknowledged and loved. During the Holocaust, where the threat of death was imminent and Jewish people lived in perpetual fear and harsh conditions, women came together to form their own sisterhoods, especially as they often were separated from their own families like the women in Harpman's novel are. This parallel between *Lagerschwester* and the female relationships in Harpman's novel supports her assertion that women come together to support their survival as a collective, focusing on the needs of all rather than some, as the patriarchal authority in this novel does. Her replication of the means women during the Holocaust employed to survive points to her view that men and women view and treat survival differently; women are guided by mental needs on top of the physical, supporting emotional connection and fostering humanity through the ways they cope against the traumatic circumstances inflicted upon them. Harpman's perspective as a refugee during World War II greatly influences the ways she weaves the female experience of the Holocaust into this narrative without directly acknowledging it. In the understanding she has of how the Nazi patriarchy failed humanity, Harpman seeks alternatives in Holocaust testimony, where a perseverance against dehumanization was evident amongst the women she replicates in her novel's characters, highlighting Harpman's ultimate view that women possess a gendered understanding of what is needed for human survival, where a collective and emotional endurance is valued above simply keeping the body alive to suffer without humanity.

Conclusion

The novel's mystery behind the women's imprisonment and landscape they flee to bears a likeness to the inconceivability of the horrors of the Holocaust. As easy as it is to say there is no answer or reason behind such depraved human brutality, the default response of the sympathetic heart neglects to acknowledge the very real power of fascism as an influencing power of ideology and policy. The power that dooms the women to their life split between a prison cell and a barren planet is one based in patriarchy and shares glaring characteristics of Nazism. Harpman is quite intentional with crafting similarities between the text and Holocaust testimonies through an often-overlooked female lens, which is informed by her perspective spending her girlhood as a refugee, fearing persecution for being Jewish. Her understanding of the unique forms of gendered trauma and how women cope informs this text greatly, with *I Who Have Never Known Men* communicating a message about Harpman's beliefs on human survival. The ultimate takeaway from the text is that the strength women are forced to exhibit as a result of patriarchal oppression reveals their ability to endure threats to humanity through emotional and communal means, rendering women the crucial key to the survival of a human race continually threatened by patriarchal ideologies.

Works Cited

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