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The Lilac and the Lab Coat: Abjection and the Resistance of Female Victims and Perpetrators in *Lilac Girls*

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Abstract

Martha Hall Kelly's *Lilac Girls* provides a complex portrayal of women's roles in World War II, focusing on the intersections of suffering, power, and resistance. This paper applies Julia Kristeva's abjection theory to examine how the novel depicts the abjection of female bodies, the psychological trauma of victims, and the moral corruption of perpetrators. Kasia, a Polish prisoner subjected to brutal medical experiments, represents the physical and psychological abject, forced into a state of suffering that renders her neither fully alive nor fully dead. Zuzanna, her sister and a fellow prisoner, embodies a quieter form of abjection—psychologically fractured, medically violated, and emotionally suppressed, her sterilization and forced role as a recorder of Nazi atrocities reflecting a deeper internalization of dehumanization. Her calm acceptance masks the psychological toll of being both subject and witness to medical violence, making her a unique embodiment of internalized abjection. In contrast, Herta, a Nazi doctor,

embodies a different aspect of abjection, one in which a woman enforces dehumanization yet ultimately becomes consumed by it. Her moral disintegration under the guise of scientific duty illustrates the danger of normalized cruelty This study explores how *Lilac Girls* juxtaposes these figures, revealing how women can resist or internalize abjection in war. By highlighting survival, defiance, and testimony, the novel reframes abjection as not only horror but also a site of potential empowerment.

Keywords: Resistance, Trauma, Abject, Ravensbrück, War, Perpetrator, Nazi.

Introduction

Martha Hall Kelly is an American author known for her historical fiction that explores the untold stories of women in history, particularly during World War II. Her debut novel, *Lilac Girls* (2016), became a New York Times bestseller, praised for its meticulous research and emotionally compelling narrative. Kelly continued her exploration of women's roles in history with *Lost Roses* (2019) and *Sunflower Sisters* (2021), both of which delve into the lives of women affected by war and societal upheaval. Through her novels, Kelly has contributed to a greater awareness of women's experiences in history, particularly those often overlooked in traditional narratives.

Martha Hall Kelly's *Lilac Girls* follows the intertwined lives of Kasia, a Polish resistance fighter imprisoned at Ravensbrück, and Herta, a Nazi doctor performing brutal experiments at the camp. Kasia endures medical atrocities alongside other prisoners, yet finds strength in resistance and survival. Herta, seeking professional recognition, descends into moral corruption as she justifies her inhumane actions. The novel explores trauma, resilience, and the blurred lines between victimhood and complicity during World War II. Thus, this paper uses these characters as a critical lens to understand how women navigate abjection, either resisting it or becoming

engulfed by it. And proves abjection functions both as a site of horror and a potential space for empowerment and resistance.

Literature Review

Mary Condren's *Women, Shame, and Abjection: Reflections in the Light of Julia Kristeva* (1999) provides a crucial foundation for understanding how abjection and shame structure women's experiences in patriarchal societies. Condren explores the ways in which religious purity laws, bodily shame, and social order contribute to the marginalization of women, positioning abjection as a tool for maintaining societal control (Condren 12).While Condren focuses on abjection within theological and societal constructs, this paper differs by applying Kristeva's abjection theory to war atrocities and medical experimentation. Furthermore, Condren primarily examines women as victims, whereas this paper extends abjection theory to both victims and perpetrators, analysing how abjection consumes those who enforce it.

Gilly Carr's article, *Narratives of Resistance, Moral Compromise, and Perpetration: The Testimonies of Julia Brichta, Survivor of Ravensbrück* (2022), provides critical insight into the moral ambiguity of Holocaust survivors who navigated both victimhood and complicity. This aligns with Kristeva's argument of abjection. Brichta's testimonies also reflect the struggle of women who resisted their abject status while being forced into morally ambiguous roles. This supports the analysis of Kasia and the "Rabbits" in *Lilac Girls*, whose resistance efforts echo real-life survival strategies documented by Ravensbrück survivors.

Abjection and the Resistance of Female Victims: The Body as a Site of Defiance

In Lilac Girls, the abjection of female victims is most viscerally represented through the medical experiments performed on the "Rabbits" at Ravensbrück. However, beyond the physical mutilation they endure, the prisoners also experience abjection in subtler but equally profound

ways through the degradation of their bodily functions and the stripping away of human dignity. Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* describes abjection as the process by which the body expels that which is considered impure or contaminating ,bodily waste, filth, or anything that disrupts the illusion of order (4). The prisoners at Ravensbrück, reduced to dehumanized subjects of experimentation, exist in a constant state of abjection, their suffering reinforcing their liminal existence between personhood and objectification

Nazi doctors deliberately infected wounds with bacteria, hoping to study the effectiveness of sulfa drugs in preventing gangrene. These experiments subjected women to agonizing pain, fever, and often permanent disability. One particularly disturbing passage details the calculated infliction of wounds to simulate battlefield injuries,

> We had prepared objects to insert into the wounds to simulate battlefront injuries. Rusty nails, wood and glass splinters, gravel, and a mix of garden soil and a bacterial culture of Clostridium tetani. Each patient would have a different infectant introduced into her wound (Kelly 214).

This passage exemplifies Kristeva's concept of abjection, where the body is forced into a state of contamination, decay, and disorder. The Nazi doctors do not simply harm the women; they transform their bodies into experimental terrains of suffering, rendering them sites of disease and degradation . The insertion of soil, rust, and bacteria transforms the body into something monstrous, neither fully alive nor dead, existing in a liminal state of pain and infection. In this way, the "Rabbits" embody Kristeva's notion of the abject, which she describes as "what disturbs identity, system, order". Their bodies, desecrated and manipulated, become symbols of ultimate degradation, reinforcing the Nazis' attempt to erase their humanity.

Yet, abjection in Lilac Girls is not solely a tool of dehumanization, it is also subverted as a means of resistance. One striking moment that exemplifies this is when Kasia suggests using their own urine to write secret messages, “Our own urine would work just as well. It’s acidic. we could code in letters written in urine…” (Kelly 232). Here, what is typically considered repulsive and degrading becomes a powerful instrument of defiance. By repurposing a substance associated with impurity and waste, the prisoners transform their abjection into a tool of survival and rebellion. This act directly challenges the Nazi efforts to strip them of agency, proving that even in the most degrading conditions, resistance persists. The use of urine as ink exemplifies how female victims in Lilac Girls reclaim their bodily autonomy, transforming an object of shame into a tool of empowerment. By inscribing messages of defiance with the very substance that marks their abjection, they symbolically reassert their humanity in a system designed to erase it.

This act of bodily reclamation through urine-coded messages finds strong resonance in Liliane Steiner’s article *The Mutilated Body: The Representation of the Feminine Body in Female Holocaust Survivors’ Memoirs* . Steiner argues that female victims often used their testimonies to rewrite the narrative of their abjected bodies, describing them not merely as objects of horror but as witnesses and instruments of resistance. In many cases, women were “forced to defecate or pee standing with their legs apart in public like animals”(Steiner 3) , acts designed to erase their humanity and dignity. Yet, rather than remaining passive victims, these women later revealed how even their most humiliating experiences became embedded in acts of resilience. Steiner emphasizes that by narrating their suffering, survivors exposed the regime’s mechanisms of dehumanization while asserting their own moral endurance. Similarly, in Lilac

Girls, the repurposing of urine for secret messages reconfigures bodily degradation into a subversive tool—an act that asserts autonomy and agency in defiance of imposed abjection.

Zuzanna Kuzmerick: Endurance and the Pursuit of Healing

Zuzanna Kuzmerick's portrayal in Lilac Girls offers a haunting but ultimately redemptive representation of female abjection. As a medical doctor imprisoned in Ravensbrück and assigned to the control group of the sulfonamide experiments, she is rendered abject not only through her physical deterioration but also by the betrayal of her professional identity. Injected with staphylococcus and tetanus bacteria and denied antibiotics, Zuzanna's body becomes a silent battleground—infected, sterilized, and ultimately marked by long-term illness, including headaches, gastric ulcers, and later, cancer. The image of her "so thin from dysentery one could see the sharp edge of her hip bone" (Kelly 254) underscores her bodily vulnerability. However, even in this extreme state of abjection, she attempts to maintain a sense of agency, instructing Kasia in rudimentary medical care despite her own decline. Her sterilization at the camp represents a profound symbolic erasure of her femininity and reproductive potential, casting her further into a liminal identity where no longer fully a doctor, woman, or patient, but rather a fragmented embodiment of all three shaped by trauma.

Unlike Kasia, who enacts resistance through covert operations, Zuzanna's defiance lies in her ability to reframe her victimhood into healing. When later diagnosed with a cancerous Virchow's node, she refuses to retreat into passivity. Instead, she embraces her illness with reflection, stating, "It's important to see both sides. Makes me a better doctor" (Kelly 410). This willingness to confront her abject condition head-on demonstrates a deep internal resilience. Zuzanna refuses to remain within the abject framework imposed upon her by Nazi violence. Rather than being consumed by it, she reframes her suffering as insight, transforming pain into

empathy and deterioration into perspective. Her desire to go to America and take advanced medical classes becomes not just a professional aspiration but an act of reclaiming the agency denied to her in the camp.

This transformation culminates in her decision to rebuild her personal life through love and family, despite the irreversible scars of sterilization and illness. Her wish to marry Serge, the Russian cook, and adopt a child represents a symbolic act of re-narrating her femininity outside biological motherhood. When Kasia questions this choice, Zuzanna insists, “I’m forty-four years old with no prospects… I’m going to do what I can to make my life a good one in the time I have left”(Kelly 437). In saying this, she refuses to be confined by her past or by the socially accepted narratives of trauma survivors. While her body bears the marks of scientific torture, and her identity was once stripped down to clinical notes read aloud by Nazi doctors, Zuzanna ultimately reclaims her subjectivity through agency, empathy, and love. Her journey does not culminate in vengeance or denial, but in a quiet reclamation of life, defined by compassion and intention . Thus, Zuzanna’s journey from abject patient to self-defining survivor becomes a subtle but powerful form of resistance, reinforcing Lilac Girls’ portrayal of female suffering as a site not only of horror but of radical possibility.

Abjection and the Female Perpetrator: Herta Oberheuser

Abjection in Lilac Girls is not limited to the victims; it also consumes those who transgress moral boundaries and become agents of horror themselves. Herta Oberheuser, the female doctor at Ravensbrück, embodies this paradox. Unlike Kasia and the other prisoners, whose abjection is imposed upon them through suffering, Herta actively embraces her role as an oppressor. Her ambition and desire for power lead her to internalize Nazi ideology, justifying her participation in medical experimentation as scientific progress rather than cruelty. However, her position

within the Nazi system is inherently unstable, she is neither fully accepted within the male-dominated hierarchy nor able to maintain a connection to traditional female identity.

Moreover Kate Docking in her article *Gender, Recruitment, and Medicine at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, 1939–1942* highlights the moral contradiction faced by female physicians at Ravensbrück, noting that women like Herta Oberheuser entered the Nazi medical system with aspirations of legitimacy and advancement, yet became entangled in a regime where healing and harm coexisted. Their participation in medicalized violence blurred the line between professional duty and ideological compliance (Docking 426–428)

Herta Oberheuser's descent into moral and psychological abjection in *Lilac Girls* does not begin at Ravensbrück but is rooted in the ideological conditioning she undergoes before she ever sets foot in the concentration camp. Her time at the BDM camp, particularly at Camp Blossom, reveals how young German women were systematically indoctrinated into Nazi ideology. These camps trained women to accept their roles as wives and mothers, reinforcing Hitler's vision of racial purity. At Camp Blossom, Aryan pregnancies were celebrated, regardless of marital status, as a means of ensuring the future of Nazi Germany. Yet, while many young women embraced this role, Herta viewed it as a limitation. She declares, "With my sights set on becoming a physician, I could not afford a pregnancy" (Kelly 48).

This moment highlights Herta's early conflict with the gendered expectations imposed upon her. Unlike many of her peers, she rejects the prescribed role of wife and mother, instead aspiring to a position of authority in a male-dominated field. However, rather than resisting Nazi ideology altogether, she internalizes its values in a way that allows her to carve out a space for herself within it. Her ambition blinds her to the moral cost of aligning herself with a regime that, despite its emphasis on racial purity, does not fully accept women as equals in professional

spaces. This tension foreshadows her later transformation at Ravensbrück, where she attempts to assert power through medicine but ultimately remains subordinate to the men who control the system.

Herta's abjection is most evident in her inability to reconcile her identity as both a doctor and an executioner. When confronted with this contradiction, she is reminded, "You can't have it both ways, Herta. Kill and still be seen as a healer. It takes a toll" (Kelly 265). This statement encapsulates her psychological disintegration, while she outwardly commits to the Nazi cause, her subconscious struggles with the inescapable horror of her actions. The very profession that should be centered on preserving life becomes a means of destruction, forcing her into a liminal state where she is neither fully a doctor nor fully a murderer, but a grotesque combination of both.

Despite her efforts to suppress emotion, those around her recognize her inner turmoil. Vilmer warns her, "Internalizing your emotions won't help you, Herta… it's not in your nature to end lives, Herta. You're no doubt experiencing psychic numbing" (Kelly 264). This suggests that Herta is not naturally predisposed to violence, but has forced herself into a role that contradicts her core identity. Her emotional numbness acts as both a shield and a symptom of disintegration, revealing the cost of conforming to inhuman ideals. Yet, this detachment does not absolve her but rather reinforces her abjection, she is emotionally deadened, existing in a space where she must continually suppress her humanity to function within the Nazi system.

Herta's story aligns with historical accounts of female Nazi perpetrators who sought power within a regime that fundamentally devalued them. Like many women who participated in the Third Reich's atrocities, she occupies a disturbing space where oppression and ambition

intertwine. Ultimately, Herta is not spared from the horror she creates, she becomes part of it, embodying the very corruption and degradation she sought to control.

Conclusion:

Abjection, while deeply terrifying, is not an absolute state but a liminal space where identity, morality, and power are contested. In *Lilac Girls* it serves as both a force of dehumanization and a potential site of transformation. The victims at Ravensbrück, particularly Kasia and the "Rabbits," endure the horrors of medical experimentation, stripped of autonomy and forced into abject suffering. Yet, their resistance, whether through secret messages written in urine, acts of defiance, or their eventual testimony, transforms their abjection into a form of empowerment. By confronting the abject, they reclaim their humanity and resist the forces seeking to erase them.

Zuzanna, though often in the background, embodies one of the most profound arcs of abjection and reclamation. As a victim of sterilization and invasive control-group experiments, she experiences the medical and gendered abjection that renders her both biologically violated and existentially displaced. However, she actively works to reclaim her identity—first through her survival, then through her compassionate medical practice, and finally in her decision to adopt a child and remap her future outside the confines of traditional femininity. Zuzanna's quiet yet resolute refusal to let her suffering define her makes her a powerful symbol of how the abject can be confronted not only with rage, but also with grace, love, and purposeful living

Herta Oberheuser, in contrast, experiences abjection as a perpetrator. Her attempt to reconcile her identity as both healer and killer leads to a psychological unravelling, demonstrating that those who enforce abjection are not immune to its effects. She is never fully accepted within the Nazi power structure nor able to suppress the cognitive dissonance of her actions, illustrating how complicity in atrocity leads to its own form of fragmentation and exile.

Ultimately, *Lilac Girls* illustrates how abjection, while a tool of oppression, also holds the potential for transformation. By interrogating why certain bodies are feared, why some are excluded, and how trauma reshapes identity, abjection can become a site of resistance. Those who confront and redefine the boundaries of abjection challenge oppressive systems and reclaim marginalized identities, turning horror into a catalyst for empowerment.

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