

**The Representation of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish  
Women as Heroines in the Novels of Four  
Jewish-American Women Writers**

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## Abstract

This dissertation will focus on four popular novels by Jewish-American women writers and the relatively neglected area of the imaginative representation of women's experiences within post-holocaust Ultra-Orthodoxy. It will explore the notion of what an Ultra-Orthodox heroine is and examine whether a coherent picture of Ultra-Orthodox heroines emerges through a consideration of the similarities and differences between the four texts' depictions of the Ultra-Orthodox societies in which their characters function. This will include the writers' use of some recurring tropes: the social conditioning of women, the centrality of the domestic sphere and its relationship to religious obligation and practice, and the duality experienced by the heroines as a result of the conflict between what is considered normative and subversive in their society.

I will consider also the significance of the writers' use of two complementary elements as a means of configuring their characters as both conventionally literary and specifically Jewish heroines. Firstly, the use of features drawn from literary genre: *Bildungsroman*, domestic novel, melodrama and comedy of manners and secondly the use of what can be read as specifically Jewish feminine models – *Binah* – intuitive self-knowledge, *Aishes Chayil* – the woman of valour, *Sotah* – the fallen woman and *Baalat Teshuva* – the repentant woman.

Some academic work does exist on the four named writers but it is limited in both quantity and scope and there is no work extant on the four novels and the relationship between conventional literary genre and the notion of Jewish heroines within them. It is this that creates the distinctiveness of my dissertation's approach and contributes to existing knowledge of the subject.



## Introduction

### **Part 1: Who are the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox?**

‘For thousands of years, we Jews had nothing but books [...] reinterpreted in each generation and reread by each generation.’<sup>1</sup>

‘And I will separate you from the nations to be for Me’<sup>2</sup>

The ‘imaginings’ of others’ lives lies at the heart of much writing by women for women.<sup>3</sup> This project is specifically interested in the ways in which four Jewish-American women novelists, Pearl Abraham, Allegra Goodman, Naomi Ragen and Ruchama King-Feuerman, imagine Ultra-Orthodox women’s experiences through the construction and mediation of their female protagonists in a way that is both distinctively Jewish and familiar also from a tradition of nineteenth century canonical texts and twentieth century women’s romance fiction. The latter offers the pleasures of a popular form predicated on the significance of ‘domestic space, courtship and marriage, and aspects of class and manners’<sup>4</sup> within story-telling. This is particularly apposite for the four writers considered here and their purposeful articulation of Ultra-Orthodox women’s experience to a female audience that is non-Orthodox or non-Jewish. In all four novels the ‘otherness’ of Ultra-Orthodoxy is imagined through the writers’ use of some central conventions of popular romance fiction, rendering the specifically Ultra-Orthodox context of the novels less alien and more immediately accessible, creating greater empathy in the responses of a general readership through the familiarity of the form.

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<sup>1</sup> Amos Oz, ‘Jews and Words’ *NPR online* (2012) [www.npr.org/books/authors](http://www.npr.org/books/authors) (accessed October 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 20:26.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p.44.

<sup>4</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p.11

My study will seek to address what an Ultra-Orthodox heroine is and consider whether a coherent picture emerges of the heroine and her world through an exploration of whether there is agreement across the four writers' configuration of the intrinsic elements in Ultra-Orthodox models of femininity. In order to judge these imaginative representations of Ultra-Orthodox women's experience in the novels, it is necessary to have some understanding of the particularities of the Ultra-Orthodox world itself and the power of its social-conditioning processes and, therefore, the contextual framework for this study is informed by two areas. Firstly, an interest in and knowledge of the resurgent world of religiously-traditional Jews, transplanted from Europe to North America and Israel after the Holocaust supports an understanding of the ways in which the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy is imaginatively presented in the work of the four women writers focused on here. In addition to this, women-led anthropological projects from the mid-80s onwards are helpful in understanding Jewish-American women's writing about observant women through the development of a more obviously feminist epistemology, one that privileges the way gender influences social relationships and sense of identity, and renders women's voice and experience as central to the transmission of Ultra-Orthodox values and behaviour.

All four texts present communities which live in ways that are circumscribed by the commandments and hold the central belief that Torah comes directly from God. This form of Judaic practice demands strict adherence to designated gender roles and it is the fictionalised configuring of these roles, and the ways in which the female protagonists are constructed as the heroines of their own narratives, that will be the focus of this dissertation. The four novelists have all emerged from the post-Holocaust world and between them represent the distinctions that exist between Ultra-Orthodox groups: these

subtle differences are represented by the imaginative communities of their narratives. Abraham's *The Romance Reader*, Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls*, Ragen's *Sotah* and King-Feurman's *Seven Blessings* offer an entry into the private spaces of Ultra-Orthodoxy, usually closed to outsiders and often at variance with each other through sectarian differences and rivalries.

This study will concentrate on the imaginative construction of domestic space, the world of Ultra-Orthodox women and the heroines at its centre in what Juliet Mitchell describes as, 'the story of their own domesticity [...] and the possibilities and impossibilities provided by that.'<sup>5</sup> These heroines are 'affective', like those of nineteenth and twentieth century, popular and canonical fiction; they are influenced by the world of feeling, aware of life's 'small desolations,'<sup>6</sup> and curious about themselves and others. They are also constrained by the emotional and physical limitations of the Ultra-Orthodox world. This project will further argue that the protagonists of the four novels are recognisable in their construction as heroines within literary genre, the *Bildungsroman* in *The Romance Reader*, the nineteenth century *Domestic novel* in *Kaaterskill Falls*, *Melodrama* in *Sotah* and *Romantic Comedy of Manners* in *Seven Blessings*, but also specifically Jewish in their characterisation and can be read as configurations of four distinct female 'types' within Jewish tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution, Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1984), p.289.

<sup>6</sup> George Steiner quoted in Gloria Cronin, 'Seasons of our (Dis) contents: Covenant Community in Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls*' in *Connections and Collisions: Identity in Contemporary Jewish American Women's Writing*, ed. by Lois E Rubin (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp.120-136 (p.120).

These archetypes of Jewish femininity are: *Binah* – the woman who instinctively understands through experience; *Aishes Chayil* – the woman of valour who is the idealised wife and mother; *Sotah* – the fallen woman who has to atone for her sins and *Baalat Teshuva* – the repentant woman who returns to the faith and my identification of them carries implications for a non-Jewish reader unfamiliar with these models.

However, the Jewish archetypes are positioned alongside more recognisable elements within the configuration of Rachel Benjamin, Elizabeth Shulman, Dina Reich and Beth Wilmer as ‘affective’ literary heroines, drawn from the genres within which they function. This provides an understanding of the characters’ Jewishness to a general readership through my situating of the genre identity and the Jewish identity as parallels. I will argue that, whilst distinctive in their literary and Jewish constructions, the four heroines are bound together within both the traditions of literary and popular heroines and the codes of an ancient tradition defined by ‘reverence for law and the Jewish past.’<sup>7</sup>

The four novels represent the plurality within the broad sweep of Orthodox Judaism, presenting an imaginative Ultra-Orthodox, or ‘Haredi’<sup>8</sup>, world which is, like the actual, both old and new. Whilst ‘Orthodox’ is a historical term that has always meant observant, the term ‘Ultra’ is a relatively recent addition from the latter part of the twentieth century which has come to denote an even greater degree of strict observance with regard to the many commandments than merely ‘Orthodox.’ The writers themselves reflect the variety of observant positions within Judaism. Abraham is a product of a Hasidic upbringing with roots in the world of the populist, pietistic

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<sup>7</sup> Nadia Valman, ‘Bad Jew/Good Jewess: Gender and Semitic Discourse in Nineteenth Century England’ in *Philo-Semitism in History*, ed. by Jonathan Karp & Adam Sutcliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.149-169 (p.161)

<sup>8</sup> Term for Ultra-Orthodoxy preferred by the Ultra-Orthodox community itself



movement begun by the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760) whose vision provided the means for simple, uneducated people to access the divine world through personal prayer and brought the intensity of charismatic religious devotion to all aspects of everyday life, freeing them from the intervention of the rabbinical classes. It offered a ‘transformed and transformative Judaism’ through an internalisation of Jewish mysticism<sup>9</sup>, or Kabbalah, which redefined Jewish values, placing prayer and the sanctification of daily life on an equal footing with the Yeshiva-centred Torah study. At the time and in the place of its origin – eighteenth century Poland and Ukraine – Hasidism was considered deviant in its reaction against the intellectual emphasis of Mitnagdic conservatism.

Goodman’s grandfather was the spiritual leader of a Mitnagdic community similar to the one created in her novel and Ragen identifies herself as Orthodox but is publically highly vocal in her criticism of Mitnagdic practice in Israel. The Mitnagdim can broadly be defined as the representatives of traditional rabbinism, practising an austere, rigorous scholarship as a means of fulfilling God’s purpose, ‘for them authority came from scholarship not piety.’<sup>10</sup> Dictated by a rabbinical elite, they are the descendants of the Yeshiva of Lithuania and are the group which opposed the new practices which Hasidism represented. In contrast to this historical provenance, King-Feuerman has family roots in the *Baal Teshuva* – Jews who return to observance - received an Orthodox education and is most closely aligned to the Modern-Orthodox movement in her own life, while choosing a *Baalat Teshuva* heroine in her novel. Modern-Orthodox Jews see Jewish Law as normative, absolute and binding and adopt a distinctive dress code whilst recognising and interacting with the secular world and speaking the

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<sup>9</sup> Ayala Fader, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), p.12.

language of the country in which they live. They position the modern state of Israel as central to their religious and political understanding and ‘incorporate modern conceptions of pluralism, rationalism and feminism.’<sup>11</sup>

The Ultra-Orthodox communities that arrived in the USA in the aftermath of the Holocaust attempted to transplant themselves as fully as they could, making it their responsibility to ‘rebuild and repopulate,’<sup>12</sup> establishing an Eastern European Jewish life that would ‘salvage the Jews from assimilation and disappearance.’<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson’s study of nationalism is helpful here in its application to the psychological, emotional and historical ties within Ultra-Orthodoxy, where both individuals and different observant groups are ‘imagined as a community [...] conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.’<sup>14</sup> For the Ultra-Orthodox this understanding of themselves as a community is rooted in ancient tradition and modern history. Friedman states that, ‘it was the near-destruction of Eastern European Jewry in the twentieth century which enabled the spread of Ultra-Orthodoxy,’<sup>15</sup> so that many of the Ultra-Orthodox communities that exist contemporaneously in New York were built rather than rebuilt, created out of a drive to keep alive what they viewed as the only authentic form of Jewish life.

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<sup>11</sup> Lynn Davidman, ‘Accommodation and Resistance to Modernity; A Comparison of 2 Contemporary Orthodox Jewish Groups’, *Sociology of Religion* 51: 1 (1990), 35-51 (p.49).

<sup>12</sup> Fader, p.9.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Heschel, ‘Imagining Judaism in America’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. by Michael P Kramer and Hana Wirth Neshet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 31-49 p.43

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, Verso 2006), p.7.

<sup>15</sup> Menachem Friedman and Samuel Heilman, ‘Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case for the Haredim’ in *Fundamentalism Observed Vol 1*, ed. by Marty E Martin and R Scott Appleby (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp197- 301 (p.244)

As a means of contextualisation, there is much insight to be gained from an examination of the subtle variations within the different Ultra-Orthodox sects. The four novels highlight this in significant ways, using distinctions in dress and codes of practice as indicative of conformity or subversion in their characters. This is important to the argument of this dissertation because these distinctions are not just representative of the plurality within Ultra-Orthodoxy or, indeed, differences in interpretation of Torah commands. Rather, it is how women are seen to represent themselves to the outside world that influences how the family and the wider community think about themselves that is the issue. Women become symbolic of the group itself and, hence, control over them must be tight; the female characters in the novels are acutely aware of this and respond to it in different ways. Thus Rachel Benjamin in *The Romance Reader* is contemptuous when upbraided by her father for refusing to wear the seamed stockings worn by ‘Satmar girls,’<sup>16</sup> whereas Goodman’s Elizabeth Shulman quietly goes to see a performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* despite her husband’s disapproval as ‘Plays aren’t exactly forbidden, but they aren’t encouraged.’<sup>17</sup>

In further understanding the complexities of Ultra-Orthodox social-conditioning mechanisms, Greenblatt’s notion of ‘self-fashioning’<sup>18</sup> is helpful through its description of how both individual and collective identity can be constructed according to a set of socially-accepted standards of dress and behaviour, ‘an element of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity.’<sup>19</sup> A general ‘self-fashioning’ is evident in the configuration of an on-going narrative of Ultra-Orthodoxy, not as a distorted myth of a

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<sup>16</sup> Pearl Abraham, *The Romance Reader* (London: Quartet, 1996), p.138.

<sup>17</sup> Allegra Goodman, *Kaaterskill Falls* (New York: Delta, 1998), p.54.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago II: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

<sup>19</sup> Greenblatt p.1.

vanished past but a redefinition as a way of recovering what has been lost to the old world, ‘common history, experience and shared cultural codes.’<sup>20</sup> A specific example is the distinctive clothing worn by Hasidic men which has no connection with the ancient texts they study daily but is, rather, borrowed from the eighteenth century Polish aristocracy amongst whom they lived and worked. The white stockings, velvet breeches, belted coats and fur-trimmed hats which have come to denote an ‘otherness’ in subsequent centuries, suggest an adoption of the ‘norm’ in their original settings. Women’s clothing is equally fashioned to meet the high standards of modesty required so that the overall effect is as uniform as that of the men but also to create an identity, ‘blouses [...] buttoned at the wrist [...] skirts that fell mid-calf [...] and heavy, seamed stockings.’<sup>21</sup> Head-coverings are equally important as signals to the outside world which carry subtle messages about women’s position within Ultra-Orthodoxy from the shaved head and kerchief of the Hasidic Satmar sect and wigs of the Mitnagdim, to the snoods and multi-coloured scarves of the Modern-Orthodox.

Self-fashioning is evident also in the writers’ use of Yiddish as an everyday language. An insistence on the speaking of Yiddish positions the Ultra-Orthodox ‘within the narratives of the past’ and insulates them from the secular society that they shun.<sup>22</sup> It is the language that up until World War II was ‘a distinct linguistic sound in the aural landscape’ of Eastern Europe,<sup>23</sup> and as such it is acknowledged but used differently by the novelists as a means of both establishing the inwardness of the heroines’ worlds and how their use of language defines their identity. In *The Romance Reader*, Abraham is

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<sup>20</sup> Stuart Hall, quoted in Laurence J Silberstein, ‘Mapping, Not Tracing: Opening Reflection’, in *Mapping Jewish Identities*, ed. by Laurence J Silberstein (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp.1 – 36 (p.2).

<sup>21</sup> Naomi Ragen, *Sotah* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1993), p.33.

<sup>22</sup> Silberstein, p.3

<sup>23</sup> ‘Women in Yiddish Culture’ Exhibit catalogue White Stork Synagogue, Wroclaw, (Summer, 2016), p.8

meticulous in establishing that Rachel's narrative and the community's dialogue would, in reality, be in Yiddish by drawing attention to the times when Yiddish is not used. The opening line of the novel 'The sound of Ma's voice speaking English wakes me' creates the use of English as beyond the norm of her Ultra-Orthodox world.<sup>24</sup> Rachel, however, uses English as much as she can and her forbidden reading is of English books.

In *Kaaterskill Falls* the English-born Elizabeth is immersed in the language of the literary canon and reads to her daughters from Andrew Lang's, 'Red Fairy Tale Book',<sup>25</sup> while Rav Kirshner, originally from Germany, has passed his love of the classics onto his son Jeremy who 'collects early printed books [...] in fine leather bindings.'<sup>26</sup> Yiddish plays no role in their lives. In Ragen's *Sotah*, the third person narration is, like Goodman's, relentlessly English but the dialogue is littered with italicised Hebrew and Yiddish words that act synecdochically to create a sense of the 'Yiddishkeit' of the enclosed world of Haredi Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> When Dina escapes to New York and leaves Yiddish behind, this is seen as a form of rebirth and freedom. This juxtaposition of English and Yiddish in the structure of the texts themselves adds to an awareness of the characters' construction as specifically Jewish heroines but also something more; English is seen to disrupt the domestic world of Yiddish and opens the heroines up to the danger of the Gentile world.

The writers' depictions of their heroines' ritualistic behaviour both at home and in their communities is a further indication of the creation of a distinctive identity: their actions

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<sup>24</sup> Abraham, p.4.

<sup>25</sup> Goodman, p.12.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 12, 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Yiddishkeit* – the traditional way of life of East European Jewish communities.

reflect an internalisation of the commandments of the Law and the requirements of their society, and the repetition of both sacred and domestic tasks instils in them a profound sense of identity. In *Sotah*, Dina wakes and immediately recites ‘the first prayer of the day even before getting out of bed.’<sup>28</sup> Beth Wilner in *Seven Blessings* kisses ‘the ceramic mezuzah on the doorpost,’<sup>29</sup> and in *Kaaterskill Falls*, the Rav’s daughter-in-law is overwhelmed by the many requirements as she prepares for one of the festivals, ‘There will be blessings for washing hands [...] for breaking bread [...] after all the meals.’<sup>30</sup> This places the woman at the heart of the home, supporting the men who will be the reciters of the blessings, providing the food that will be blessed and producing the children who will be the next generation of pious men. It is the representation of this micro-world of Ultra-Orthodoxy, this domestic space that is the foundation of the religious practice and the women who are the *Binah*, *Aishes Chayil*, *Sotah* and *Baalat Teshuva* within this, that will be the focal point of this dissertation

## **Part 2 Heroines: An Infinity of Mirrors**

‘I am going to emerge as the heroine by and by’<sup>31</sup>

*The Romance Reader*, *Kaaterskill Falls*, *Sotah* and *Seven Blessings* are strongly informed by the writers’ personal context and their experience of and emotional attachment to the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy in New York and Jerusalem. The references to religious and cultural practices, the characters’ names, language and occupations embedded in the texts place the reader in a world defined by Ultra-Orthodox discourses

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<sup>28</sup> Ragen, p.24.

<sup>29</sup> Ruchama King-Feurman, *Seven Blessings* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2003), p.12.

<sup>30</sup> Goodman, p.31.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin Group, 1997), p.55.

which serve to establish the strong sense of identity shared by the communities in the novels. *The Romance Reader* is Pearl Abraham's emotional autobiography: her heroine shares much with the specifics of the writer's own Hasidic background, from which she has moved away but not rejected, and individual character, 'I feel it is very much a part of my life.'<sup>32</sup> Goodman positions an Ultra-Orthodox community at the heart of a novel that is influenced by the nineteenth century traditions in which she has academic expertise, while Ragen's novel is one of her 'Haredi Trilogy'<sup>33</sup> where she seeks to fictively explore and expose some of the social problems extant in the Ultra-Orthodox community in Jerusalem. King-Feuerman offers an affirmative tale of the struggle to find true love but within the context of a community shaped both by the tragic history of European Jews and the challenges of being newly-observant.

The four novels operate also within a wider context of late twentieth and early twenty first century Jewish women's writing about Ultra-Orthodox identity which is rich and varied. Cynthia Ozick in *The Pagan Rabbi* (1971) Carl Friedman in *The Shovel and the Loom* (1993) and Dara Horn's *In The Image* (2003) explore Judaic traditions and practices in distinctive ways while Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* (1995), Naomi Alderman's *Disobedience* (2006) and Anouk Markovitz's *I am Forbidden* (2012) all offer narratives which, in their use of multiple voices and shifts in time and place frames, are more self-consciously literary and experimental in their means of expression. Abraham, Goodman, Ragen and King-Feuerman, like Tova Mirvis in *The Outside World* (2004) and Eve Harris in *The Marrying of Chani Kaufman* (2013), adopt the conventions of popular romance fiction as the most effective means of exploring

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<sup>32</sup> Dinitia Smith, 'An Author's Hasidic Roots Become her Inspiration', *New York Times* (2005) [www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08) (accessed November 2015).

<sup>33</sup> *The Sacrifice of Tamar* (Toby Press, 1989); *Sotah* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1993) *Jepthe's Daughter* (Toby Press, 1995).

women's experiences of belonging within Ultra-Orthodoxy. The novels draw from a wide range of recognisable traditions within popular fiction which include critically well-received writers such as Anne Tyler but also mass market family sagas from writers like Belva Plain, as well as the women's 'middlebrow' novel of the mid-twentieth century.

A conventional linear narrative and a reliable narrative voice are used by all four texts to position the heroine as the moral centre of the novels, privileging characterisation over form and providing a platform for the dissemination of Ultra-Orthodox rituals and practices through a tightly organised plot and supportive descriptive or explanatory detail. These features, common to popular fiction, are used with their audience in mind. All four writers are aware that, whilst they place Ultra-Orthodox women characters at the heart of their narratives, real Ultra-Orthodox women will not read these novels because they are produced outside the community and are considered unsympathetic to Ultra-Orthodox values<sup>34</sup> and the writers recognise their responsibilities as producers of narratives about Ultra-Orthodoxy for a non-Orthodox or non-Jewish audience.

Goodman and King-Feurman, aware of the dangers of over-emphasising the allure of a mysterious and ancient religious culture within the structures of popular romance fiction, are committed to a normalisation of Ultra-Orthodox behaviours and rituals through a covert narration that avoids details about *niddah*<sup>35</sup> and other practices which could appeal to a prurient curiosity. Abraham and Ragen, on the other hand, offer greater information about women's private and sexual lives for their readership and are

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<sup>34</sup> Alyse Fisher Roller, *The Literary Imagination of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 1999) offers an extensive study of fiction produced by Ultra-Orthodox women for Ultra-Orthodox women

<sup>35</sup> *Niddah*: family purity. An extensive set of rules regarding women's behaviour including that during and after menstruation



more explicitly critical of patriarchal practices within Ultra-Orthodoxy through a more self-conscious, intrusive narrative voice.

Susan Jacobowitz places the novels in the context of an older tradition of Jewish American women's writing when she describes Abraham's Rachel and Goodman's Elizabeth as the 'inheritors of Esther Singer Kreitman's Deborah and Anzia Yeziarska's Sara [...] trying to make choices that acknowledge [d] their own desires.'<sup>36</sup> Like these earlier Jewish heroines, the twentieth-century characters struggle to find an independent voice and position within their families and the wider world but Rachel, Elizabeth, Dina and Beth are not in the Polish shtetls or New York tenements of the early 1900s, these Jewish heroines have an additional element to contend with – the absolutes of late-twentieth century Ultra-Orthodoxy. Abraham and Goodman, Ragen and King-Feurman are the Post-Holocaust generation, born between 1949 and 1967. Three of them reflect the re-emergence of an explicit and visible Orthodoxy, one which Kreitman and Yeziarska and their fictional characters rejected in their adult lives. The four twentieth century heroines are distinctively religious and, whilst open to a variety of influences and experiences in their narratives, they are characterised as products of the early socialisation of girls destined to grow up to become Jewish wives and mothers. In Ultra-Orthodox society 'Identity is constructed in relation to major past events [...] prominent in many biblical verses,'<sup>37</sup> and reinforced in the home. The formative influences on

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Jacobowitz, 'Hardly There even when she wasn't Lost': Orthodox Daughters and the 'Mind-Body Problem in Contemporary Jewish-American Fiction,' in *Shofar* 22.3 (Spring 2004), 72-94 (p.74). Esther Kreitman *Deborah* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1983) – the heroine is Deborah Ber. Anzia Yeziarska, *The Breadgivers* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1984) – the heroine is Sara Smolinsky.

<sup>37</sup> Orit Yafeh, 'The Time in the Body: Cultural Construction of Femininity in Ultra-Orthodox Kindergartens for Girls,' *Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 35.4 (2007), 516-553 (p.520).

Ultra-Orthodox girls are older women within the community and the female characters of the Torah.

Abraham's Rachel is drawn to the drama and lyricism of biblical narratives as well as her forbidden romances 'I rate prayer books, Haggadahs and megillahs by the number of stories in them,'<sup>38</sup> while King-Feuerman's Beth 'clasped her leather-bound siddur to her heart.'<sup>39</sup> Ultra-Orthodox girls and women are expected to internalise the values that are inculcated through a powerful meta-narrative of religious orthodoxy that controls through the imposition of a sense of 'truth.'<sup>40</sup> For women, their shared heritage and identity as Jews is central and their roles within this religious framework are quite specific. The matriarch Sarah was the first woman to light Shabbat candles, the first of the women's specific commandments which marks the beginning of sacred domestic time, and this is seen as an historical and religious obligation which all Ultra-Orthodox girls will come to assume when they become wives and mothers. Each woman in her home is the heroine of her own story.

Whether it is through childhood stories told in the home or religious education in synagogue or at school, the stories of the Bible and its heroines provide a locus for all Ultra-Orthodox women. Whilst Gail Twersky-Reimer recognises that the innate power of these stories and characters creates an imaginative world for the very young who then carry these images into adulthood where they 'define Jewish character and delineate its

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<sup>38</sup> Abraham, p.46.

<sup>39</sup> King-Feuerman, p.14.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979) p.xxiv.

possibilities'<sup>41</sup> she goes on to highlight how these are limited in scope. They conform to the binary oppositions of a more generalised male representation of women: 'passive/aggressive; independent/loyal; proud/humble,' with the familiar trope of the virtuous woman being worthy of praise and the disobedient woman ostracised and punished.<sup>42</sup> The novels under consideration, however, offer Ultra-Orthodox heroines who are unwilling to accept all the limitations imposed on them by conservative readings of women, whether it be about what they read, wear, do or say.

At the heart of this dissertation is a critique of how the characters of Abraham and Goodman, Ragen and Feuerman are constructed as Ultra-Orthodox Jewish heroines who conform to feminine models drawn from Judaism, 'types' both positive and negative, normative and subversive and familiar within this tradition. But they also reflect secular 'types' taken from novels across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and from a range of genre which influence the shaping of heroine, text and context. The four writers adopt and adapt characteristics of recognisable literary genre as a means of constructing narratives that reflect the imaginative Ultra-Orthodox worlds in which the characters function. Chapter One will focus on *The Romance Reader*, where Abraham uses a conventional *Bildungsroman* form to chart the development of Rachel Benjamin from a 12 year old bibliophile to a 17 year old divorcee. The chapter will chart how Rachel's emotional and intellectual growth is played out against a background of books; those that are part of normative Hasidic life and those that are not, and consider the ways that details of Ultra-Orthodox family and community life are embedded in the narrative to provide a context for the protagonist's development as a Jewish heroine.

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<sup>41</sup> Gail Twersky Reimer, 'Eschewing Esther/Embracing Esther: The Changing Representation of Biblical Heroines' in *Talking Back – Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. by Joyce Antler (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1998), pp.207-219 (p.208)

<sup>42</sup> Twersky Reimer, p.208.

Thus, the teenage ‘reading heroine’ becomes *Binah*, displaying intuitive and emotional intelligence, considered a feminine quality by Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah.<sup>43</sup> Rachel Benjamin is the Jewish woman who reads and understands and, as a result of this, rebels as part of the process of self-realisation.

Chapter Two will move to *Kaaterskill Falls* where Goodman puts a 34-year-old dedicated wife and mother of five at the heart of her domestic novel. Here, the plot does not revolve around the protagonist’s preparations for love and marriage but instead explores the heroine’s critical self-discovery and crisis in a strict Mitnagdic community, ending with the birth of a sixth daughter as a resolution of sorts. The chapter will argue that, whilst the structure and voice of the novel is reminiscent of the nineteenth century domestic novel and the character of Goodman’s heroine similar to the heroines of George Eliot and twentieth century domestic novelists, Elizabeth Shulman is shaped also as a specifically Jewish type, the *Aishes Chayil*.<sup>44</sup> The Jewish woman of valour is the idealised wife and mother who is devoted to the needs of her family; it is this that is explored through an interrogation of how Elizabeth can be read as subverting as well as conforming to the role of *Aishes Chayil*.

Chapter Three will concentrate on *Sotah*, the novel’s title taken from a term that reflects both the ancient ceremony that a ‘fallen woman’ was forced to perform to prove her innocence and Dina’s role as eponymous Jewish heroine.<sup>45</sup> Ragen’s narrative deals with

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<sup>43</sup> *Binah*: There is no term in Hebrew that means ‘reader,’ perhaps because reading is such an integral part of Judaic religious practice

<sup>44</sup> *Aishes Chayil*: the Jewish woman of Valour who sets the tone of love and spiritual and personal growth in the home

<sup>45</sup> *Sotah* a woman accused of adultery underwent a public ceremony where her innocence or guilt was decided

Ultra-Orthodox female transgression through an imaginative construction of both the controlling forces of private and public life in Jerusalem but also within the parameters of a conventional melodrama. This chapter will argue how Dina Reich, the emotional core of the novel, is characterised as the virtuous woman pursued by the predatory male, recognisable from nineteenth century melodrama but here embedded in twentieth century Ultra-Orthodoxy. It will investigate the ways in which Ragen combines the use of tropes from popular romance writing and that of the women's consciousness-raising novel to create a redemptive conclusion.

Chapter Four will critique King-Feuerman's *Seven Blessings* which, in its detailed observation of the values and customs of the Modern-Orthodox, uses the conventions of romantic comedy of manners in presenting the complexities of match-making in Jerusalem. The emphasis on exploring the collective mind-set of a society and the ironic tone of the narrative when dealing with the dominant mores of the group, are close to Jane Austen and Shakespearean comedy, and this chapter will consider how both this and the marriage plot, with its conventionally happy ending, are adapted within the context of Ultra-Orthodoxy. As a result, Beth Wilner is both a conventional heroine in her search for personal happiness and distinctively Jewish in her role as *Baalat Teshuva*, a 'repentant' newly-observant practitioner who seeks spiritual fulfilment through Jewish marriage.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, this dissertation will explore the ways in which the heroines of the four novels are distinctively Ultra-Orthodox in their context, characterisation and their conflicts: the

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<sup>46</sup> *Baal Teshuva*: 'Master of Return'. A term for non-observant Jews who return to religious practice.

Jewish ‘types’ they represent lending a further layer of complexity to the challenges they face as heroines. In all four texts, however different they may be in genre, the positioning of each twentieth century heroine in her narrative is fashioned by a particularly Ultra-Orthodox concern so that Rachel, Elizabeth, Dina and Beth all function as individuals within Orthodoxy, resisting the narrowness of the ideas about what an Ultra-Orthodox woman should be. Their writers create twentieth century Ultra-Orthodox characters who are aware of their contemporary world but subject to nineteenth century limitations, the kind of heroines who belong to both a canonical and a popular tradition of women characters who are created by women to be read by other women and, like Jane Eyre, long for ‘other and more vivid kinds of goodness.’<sup>47</sup> Looked at together, the four novels offer the image of the intelligent, sensitive but frustrated heroine, repeated again and again in the tradition of other novels about women, and it is into this infinity of mirrors that the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish heroines of Abraham, Goodman, Ragen and King-Feurman are placed.

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<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p.141.

## Chapter 1: The Reading Heroine: *Binah*

### *The Romance Reader: Pearl Abraham*

‘A strange thrill of awe passed through Maggie while she read’<sup>48</sup>

‘When I only begin to read, I forget I’m on this world’<sup>49</sup>

*The Romance Reader* (1995) is part of a new impulse within American-Jewish women’s writing from the mid-1990s that has been described as ‘a new wave of literary creativity.’ It reflects an interest in models of femininity within Ultra-Orthodoxy that pays ‘unprecedented attention to religion’ as well as being rooted in a ‘fascination with women’s lives.’<sup>50</sup> The interest of this critique lies in how Abraham configures Rachel Benjamin both as an archetypal rebellious, book-loving heroine, familiar from a tradition within women’s writing across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and one who is quintessentially Ultra-Orthodox. This is achieved through the narrative marrying of features from the feminine *Bildungsroman* and the less-familiar Jewish mysticism of *Binah*, a Kabbalah term denoting intuitive self-awareness and understanding.

Existing critical interest in *The Romance Reader* has concentrated on the central idea of duality and reads this as a site of conflict. Lievens identifies the significance of Abraham’s construction of a ‘double consciousness’ in Rachel, and asserts that this is formed through the competing demands of the essentialist identity required by Ultra-

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<sup>48</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Pan Books, 1973), p.272.

<sup>49</sup> Anzia Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 1987), p.7.

<sup>50</sup> Naomi Sokoloff, ‘American Jewish Writing Today’, *AJS Review* 30. 2 (November 2006), 227-230 (p.227).

Orthodoxy and the opportunities offered by contemporary American secular society.<sup>51</sup> I will argue here that this duality – the sacred versus the secular, the real versus the imagined and the use of Yiddish as normative and English as subversive within Ultra-Orthodox practices – is presented as moving towards an eventual reconciliation of its internal conflicts through Abraham’s use of *Bildungsroman* and *Binah* features in the narrative. Both are concerned with the acquisition of self-knowledge through lived-experience; both focus on characters’ ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood as a means of self-realisation; both accommodate the path to maturity. The tensions presented in *The Romance Reader* can be understood as existing not in direct opposition to one another but operating as parallels, running alongside each other. When Steven Kellman describes the novel as ‘story-telling [...] both sacred and sacrilegious’<sup>52</sup> this can be interpreted as complementary rather than conflicting, the co-existence of two elements of Rachel’s experience moving towards a point of understanding and acceptance of her identity as an Ultra-Orthodox heroine.

*The Romance Reader* charts Rachel’s first person *Bildungsroman* from twelve to eighteen in a way that ‘defly lifts the opaque curtain from the closed Hasidic world’ through evocative and unsentimental description.<sup>53</sup> From the start there is a sense of the rich spirituality of this world, created through descriptions of ‘dark shadows of Chassidic men’ and also ‘white kerchiefed heads bent over their prayer books’ as well as an awareness of the physical poverty of ‘food coupons,’ and ‘dresses more than ten

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<sup>51</sup> Bart Lievens, ‘Jewish American Fiction on the Border: Culture, Confrontations, Double Consciousness and Hybridity in the Work of Pearl Abraham,’ in *Unfinalised Moments: Essays in the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative*, ed. by Derek Parker Royal (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2010), pp.187 – 200.

<sup>52</sup> Steven G Kellman, ‘Storytelling both Sacred and Sacrilegious,’ in *Forward Online*, (2005). <[forward.com/culture/2959/storytelling](http://forward.com/culture/2959/storytelling)> (accessed November 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Lore Dickstein, ‘The World of Our Mothers’. Review of *The Romance Reader NY Times Book Review* (1995) [www.nytimes.com.1995/10/29/books/world](http://www.nytimes.com.1995/10/29/books/world) (accessed January 2016).



years old.<sup>54</sup> Alongside this, Abraham establishes a counter-life that serves as Rachel's sentimental education through her love of books and the imagined world of the stories from which she learns a 'readerly sympathy,' an emotional intelligence developed through her response to fictive experience.<sup>55</sup> The elements of Rachel both as an Ultra-Orthodox and a reading heroine are signposted early on in the narrative: while the first three chapters privilege the performativity of Ultra-Orthodox family life through a focus on the routines and rituals of observance, by Chapter 4 the trope of reading is introduced as both a normative and a subversive activity which is then fully explored in the rest of the novel. Esther Kleinbold Labovitz acknowledges the *Bildungsroman*'s characteristic use of reading as part of the search for self through the education of the mind and feelings, 'Nothing advances the reader's intimacy with the heroine's quest so much as the knowledge of her passionate reading habits.'<sup>56</sup>

Abraham adopts a similar method in her presentation of Rachel's reading choices which reflect both her religious and secular identities. This can be interpreted as oppositional, with Rachel constructed as a conflicted self, but Abraham is interested in juxtaposing these two elements in a more balanced way. She establishes the centrality of texts to Ultra-Orthodox life by drawing on an understanding of Jews as the People of the Book who have 'forged an identity and community [...] through reading.'<sup>57</sup> Rachel is drawn to this normative world of sacred texts not just by its proximity, 'on every wall are stacks [...] of books'<sup>58</sup> but also by a love of the words and their history, 'the [...] poetry

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<sup>54</sup> Abraham, pp. 86, 48, 26, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Ilana Blumberg, *Houses of Study: A Jewish Woman among Books* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), p.77.

<sup>56</sup> Esther Kleinbold Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1988), p.26.

<sup>57</sup> Helene Meyers, *Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness* (Albany: State of New York University, 2011), p.7.

<sup>58</sup> Abraham, p.35

[...] liturgical prayers [...] songs'<sup>59</sup>. These narratives are presented as part of the cultural and imaginative history of Ultra-Orthodoxy and of Abraham herself, whose Jewish education allowed her access to 'profound ideas and questions.'<sup>60</sup> The early chapters of *The Romance Reader* present Rachel as a heroine who is part of the 'complicated latticework' of Jewish traditions where all aspects of everyday life are governed by adherence to the 613 commandments.<sup>61</sup>

Running parallel to this is the transgressive domain of, 'reading trafe books,' which draws Rachel into a secular world and her narrative is littered by references to texts familiar to a general reader.<sup>62</sup> There is the pre-adolescent innocence of 'Nancy Drew' and 'The Bobbsey Twins' as well as the more subversive Victoria Holt romances whose covers contain images of women with uncovered 'long pale hair' and offer glimpses into the hidden world of sexuality.<sup>63</sup> Whether adventures with child-detectives, the gothic romance of, *Rebecca* or the melodrama of *Gone with the Wind*,<sup>64</sup> these stories offer Rachel access to an imagined existence that is part of the maturation process, an activity which allows 'readers[...] to see themselves as they might be in different circumstances.'<sup>65</sup> Her reading provides Rachel with something that the wider community of women readers will recognise, 'a way to [...] signal [...] who we wanted to be [...] part of our self-fashioning,' as well as 'a place where [...] our ideas of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.45

<sup>60</sup> Aryeh Lev Stoller, 'Artists in Conversation – Pearl Abraham' *Bomb Magazine* (2005) [bomb.magazine.org/article/2728/pearl-abraham](http://bomb.magazine.org/article/2728/pearl-abraham) (accessed December 2015).

<sup>61</sup> Sally Howard, 'When Western Women Stop Being Objectified,' *Telegraph on Sunday* (2016) [s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/the-life-of-orthodox-women](http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/the-life-of-orthodox-women) (accessed September 2016).

<sup>62</sup> Abraham, p.37. meaning non-kosher

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, pp.32, 73, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.174.

<sup>65</sup> Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire* (Paladin, 1984), p.99.

ourselves are fashioned.’<sup>66</sup> Here, Mead and Light both reference Greenblatt’s term to describe reading as a means of consciously defining an identity. Rachel’s Jewish ‘self’ is determined through the collective practices of Ultra-Orthodoxy, but she can attempt to define herself as the heroine of her own narrative through the imaginative experience offered by reading ‘some of the fictions within which women live.’<sup>67</sup>

This experimentation with imagined identities through vicarious experience is presented as something that can lead to expectations which cannot be realised in an Ultra-Orthodox world and Nora Rubel argues that this renders Rachel unable to ‘reconcile the life of her mind and the life that she lives.’<sup>68</sup> Her father warns her, ‘I don’t want you to read about goyim,’<sup>69</sup> emphasizing the tension between her Ultra-Orthodox traditions and the rest of the world. Like Maggie Tulliver ‘the [...] rebellious girl,’<sup>70</sup> Rachel offers a spirited defence of her independence, ‘Why can’t I just do what I want’<sup>71</sup> and her romance-reading becomes an act of resistance. Labovitz discusses the importance of this sort of rebellion as a means of allowing a young heroine to find her

‘inner standing [...] in a family and society where custom and place for women in particular was fixed and determined’<sup>72</sup>,

Abraham describes all her novels as ‘about the act of becoming,’<sup>73</sup> and *The Romance Reader* and her later novels are explorations of how her characters form a sense of their

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<sup>66</sup> Rebecca Mead, *The Road to Middlemarch* (London: Granta, 2014), p.6; Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge Reissue 2013), p.x

<sup>67</sup> Light, p.xiii.

<sup>68</sup> Rubel, p.67.

<sup>69</sup> Abraham, p.35 *goyim* - Gentiles/non-Jews.

<sup>70</sup> Eliot, p.27.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p.211.

<sup>72</sup> Labovitz, p.75.

<sup>73</sup> Lost in Fiction, ‘An Interview about Romance with Pearl Abraham,’ (2012) [www.lostinfiction.co.uk/?=718](http://www.lostinfiction.co.uk/?=718) (accessed December 2015).

‘inner standing’ and identity. Rachel Benjamin is, in her growing realisation of her limited opportunities, the heroine who most closely mirrors Abraham’s Hasidic background from where the novel’s formative experiences and ‘intimate knowledge of Ultra-Orthodox life are derived.’<sup>74</sup> She is aware of the importance of all reading to the emotional and psychological development of adolescents, but sees the romance novel as ‘the holy grail of becoming,’ because it ‘serve(s) in emancipatory ways,’ opening up the world of sexuality within the security of imagined experience.<sup>75</sup> However, she recognises also that the ways in which these texts are read and internalised by adolescents can lead to a false ‘promise [...] of love,’<sup>76</sup> for the easily-impressionable, teenage reader and this becomes part of Rachel’s *Bildungsroman* journey – to learn from real experience rather than that ‘only seen [it] in books.’<sup>77</sup>

The ‘emancipatory’ experiences offered by the reading of forbidden books, whether they are populist or canonical may be illusionary, but Abraham presents them as a way for Rachel to navigate an understanding of herself. Romances provide her with access to ‘Human experiences which a [...] narrowed life denies’<sup>78</sup> and contribute to her *Bildungsroman* experiences, albeit vicariously. Rachel Brownstein writes that, ‘in novels, women read romances and look up from the pages with their vision blurred,’<sup>79</sup> but for Rachel, the act of reading romances sharpens her vision by offering imaginative experiences denied by her real world. In this way she is constructed as a type of *Bildungsroman* heroine held in affection by women readers: she is sister both to poor,

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<sup>74</sup> Dinitia Smith ‘An Author’s Hasidic Roots become her Inspiration’ *New York Times* (2005) [www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08) (accessed December 2015).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Abraham, p.13.

<sup>78</sup> Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession* (London: Persephone, 2008), p.248.

<sup>79</sup> Rachel Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.32.

Irish immigrant Francie Nolan in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, a character who when she reads is ‘happy as only a girl could be with a book’<sup>80</sup> and to plain socialite Charlotte Vale in Olive Higgins Prouty’s *Now Voyager* who is ‘an omnivorous reader of fiction.’<sup>81</sup> This love of the imagined world pulls fictive heroines from quite different backgrounds together as a recognisable group regardless of distinctions of social class and geographical location, just as reading about them does the same in the creation of a community of real-women-readers. Rachel is part of the connectedness that exists between those who produce the narratives, the heroines who inhabit them and the women who read them.

Labovitz describes Simone de Beauvoir’s early, limited life as a time when ‘reading would take the place of lived life for this heroine’<sup>82</sup> and Abraham constructs Rachel as showing a similar awareness when she expresses her discontent with suburban life in contrast to the excitement of the city, ‘If we lived here I’d be doing things, not reading about other people doing things.’<sup>83</sup> She recognises that, whilst reading is deeply satisfying as part of an interior life, it is not the same as lived experience. Rachel’s recording of her story is reminiscent also of Cassandra Mortmain in *I Capture the Castle*, as she fully achieves what Cassandra promises to do in her journal, ‘to capture all our characters and put in conversations.’<sup>84</sup> As heroines, they share a troubled family life, an awareness of poverty and an intelligence that allows them to create narratives of keen insight. Abraham presents Rachel as intuitively aware of the stories around her,

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<sup>80</sup> Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (London: Arrow Books, 2000), p.258.

<sup>81</sup> Olive Higgins Prouty, *Now Voyager* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York Press, 2004), p.78.

<sup>82</sup> Labovitz, p.105.

<sup>83</sup> Abraham, p.97.

<sup>84</sup> Dodie Smith, *I Capture the Castle* (London: Virago Press, 1995), p.4.

not just her own, ‘we pass house after house too quickly [...] the people [...] are gone before I can [...] figure out their stories.’<sup>85</sup> This description of others’ lives passing before her as she travels across New York shows Rachel as possessing something beyond the subjective perception of a mainstream *Bildungsroman* subject through her imaginative engagement with the world outside her own teenage preoccupations. This element of her construction as a heroine, while rooted in her secular reading experiences, can also be linked to the distinctively Jewish concept of *Binah*. It is one of the central features of the Kabbalistic Sefirot, or attributes of God, defined as intuitive understanding, an emotional intelligence ‘which our ancient sources told us inhered in women.’<sup>86</sup>

Kabbalah explores the inner processes of spirituality and is an essential element in Hasidism which seeks to invoke God in all aspects of the material world. Harold Bloom describes *Binah* in dynamic terms as ‘an intelligence not so much passive as dramatically open’ and ‘a prism breaking open illumination into what can be apprehended’.<sup>87</sup> This is Rachel Benjamin, with her need to understand the world and to seek new experiences through her reading and her everyday interactions. Abraham draws on a term familiar from mysticism more generally when she describes Rachel as moving towards ‘self-knowing, towards Gnosis’<sup>88</sup> which signifies the insight that is the central element of Jewish *Binah*. Rachel’s desire for self-knowledge is not immediately recognisable as a spiritual quest but rather a striving for experience and through this the development of her identity. This manifests itself as a rebellion against the ‘rigid

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<sup>85</sup> Abraham, p.105.

<sup>86</sup> Blumberg, p.3.

<sup>87</sup> Harold Bloom, *Genius* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), pp. xiii, 191

<sup>88</sup> Judy Bolton Fasman, ‘Pearl Abraham Branches Out,’ *Forward online Sisterhood* (2010) [forward.com/sisterhood/128262/pearl-abraham](http://forward.com/sisterhood/128262/pearl-abraham) (accessed February 2016).

strictures' that Hasidism imposes on her and, as such, is understood by her parents as transgressive.<sup>89</sup>

But this could equally be interpreted as an intelligent seeking-for-truth through her search for herself, an interrogation of the hidden meanings that exist in her Ultra-Orthodox world by looking outside the immediacy of her family and their society. Rachel's need for new experiences and her love of the written word suggest her connection to her father and his seeking of wisdom through Judaic practice and his writing - although neither character recognises or acknowledges this. Abraham asserts that the, 'idea of self creation isn't distant from the supreme task of the Hasid: to achieve a measure of divinity.'<sup>90</sup> Both Rachel and the Rebbe are striving for this through separate but similar channels. To search for an understanding of this truth, this self, is both *Bildungsroman* and *Binah* and through these Abraham focuses on Rachel's 'double-ness' which is played out through an exploration of the temptations of adolescence and the rituals and language of Ultra-Orthodoxy.

Internal, adolescent conflict, 'I'm home but not home [...] I love them and I don't',<sup>91</sup> is well- documented in a range of female *Bildungsroman* but Abraham foregrounds Rachel's experience as an Ultra-Orthodox heroine which means that she is answerable to a community, not just her family. This is significant in her construction as a Jewish heroine where the discourses of Ultra-Orthodox expectations and social-conditioning are embedded in the narrative. Thus, Rachel's sense of duality is situated both in the cultural and religious life which she finds so restrictive in its definition of what she is

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<sup>89</sup> Gay Willentz, 'Cultural Mediation and the Immigrant's Daughter: Anzia Yeziarska's Bread Givers', *Melus*, 17.3, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism (Autumn, 1991 – Autumn 1992), 33–41 (p.34).

<sup>90</sup> Pearl Abraham, 'Divinity School or Trusting the Act of Writing,' in *On Being and Not Being a Jewish American Writer*, ed. by Derek Rubin ( New York: Schocken Books, 2005), pp. 227 – 237 (p.231)

<sup>91</sup> Pearl Abraham, *The Romance Reader* p.296.

and can be, but also in the field of her language acquisition and use where, in general, Yiddish is normative and English is subversive. Abraham makes this one of the key factors in Rachel's configuration as a specifically Ultra-Orthodox *Bildungsroman* subject. *The Romance Reader* starts in 1970 when Rachel is twelve, the age where according to Abramac Hasidic girls start 'switching to English when communicating' between themselves in school.<sup>92</sup> Thus, speaking English in certain controlled situations is seen as a rite of passage which allows girls to access the community of older women who speak English when dealing with the non-Orthodox world. Rachel's father and oldest brother are highly critical of the fact that she chooses to speak English in their home context; as Rachel's mother speaks very little English this is interpreted as a form of exclusion, a secret language that provides privacy and freedom, 'You're always speaking English so Ma doesn't understand.'<sup>93</sup>

The opening line of the novel, 'The sound of Ma's voice speaking English wakes me'<sup>94</sup> symbolises a central conflict in Rachel's *Bildungsroman*. Abraham embeds details in the dialogue and first-person narration that establish the cultural-linguistic barriers between the Benjamin family's world and that of the outside. The fact that her mother is using English denotes a necessary interaction with the secular world that she would otherwise avoid, but Abraham is more importantly drawing attention to a detail that will be significant throughout the novel; Rachel the narrator relates this detail in English to the reader, even though English would not be her first language at home. The present tense used does not allow Rachel to record these events in the manner of a retrospective narrator at some distant point when her world has changed and her perceptions altered.

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<sup>92</sup> Gabi Abramac, 'Between Two Worlds: Language and Culture in the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Communities of New York City and in Upstate New York' *Studii de Stiinta si Cultura* 10.4 (December 2014), 23 – 30 (p.27). [www.academia.edu/...Between-two-worlds](http://www.academia.edu/...Between-two-worlds) (accessed January 2016).

<sup>93</sup> Abraham, p.121.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.



That is Abraham's own position – she says that she had to 'step outside before I could see inside'<sup>95</sup> and did not write this novel until she had made an adult life outside Ultra-Orthodoxy. Behind the immediacy of Rachel's youthful narrative, there is a strong sense of the voice of the mature Abraham who is able to 'look back critically upon her former self' controlling the narrative with empathy.<sup>96</sup>

In the way that the reader is allowed direct access to characters' experiences which would be enacted in a Yiddish-speaking world but are here rendered in English, Abraham is referencing the early-twentieth century, Jewish-American immigrant tradition of Henry Roth and Anzia Yezierska in her presentation of the relationship between the writers' own language, that which they choose to write in and the language of their narrator. Language is used here as an indicator of a complex cultural identity: both Roth and Yezierska, like Abraham, wrote only in English although their mother tongue was Yiddish, like that of their narrator-protagonists. Hana Wirth Neshet describes Roth's novel, *Call it Sleep* as 'a book written in English but experienced by the reader as if it were a translation.'<sup>97</sup> The opening line of Abraham's novel serves as an echo of this, establishing itself in an Jewish-American tradition which looks back sixty years: a tradition to which Abraham is adding and reconfiguring through her positioning of her characters in a world dominated by a language that belongs to another time and place.

A number of techniques beyond that of Rachel's 'translated' narration are used as a means of creating the Benjamin family's Ultra-Orthodox milieu. The rhythmic

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<sup>95</sup> Aryeh Lev Stoller

<sup>96</sup> Susan Snader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Cornell UP, 1992), p.179.

<sup>97</sup> Hana Wirth Neshet, 'Afterword: Between Mother Tongue and Native Language' in *Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), pp. 443 - 461 (p.448).

construction of Abraham's dialogue reflects Yiddish cadences, 'So change the day for the laundry' and 'May her eyes and teeth fall out'<sup>98</sup> and both dialogue and narration are littered with juxtapositions of English and Yiddish phrases without italics, such as when Rachel's mother says 'Soon we'll have another Vachnacht,'<sup>99</sup> and 'the son grows up sheygetz'<sup>100</sup> although both these examples would, in reality, be fully in Yiddish. There are also numerous embedded references to details such as, 'Negel wasser' and 'shtibel,'<sup>101</sup> where Abraham makes no concessions to the reader's possible lack of knowledge, so that the meanings are relayed through their context rather than a glossary, and used as ways of reinforcing a sense of Rachel's enclosed, Yiddish-rich Ultra-Orthodox world.

Using English is a reaction against her Ultra-Orthodox background and its European legacy but it is also, more significantly, a claiming of an independent identity revealed to her through her reading. Wirth Neshet writes that *Call it Sleep* is about 'an immigrant child's quest for a personal and cultural identity apart from his parents'<sup>102</sup> and this trope of identity-building has been recognised as a central interest of the Jewish-American immigrant sub-genre. Gert Buelens describes Yeziarska's Sara Smolinsky in *The Bread Givers* 'desire to escape from the material and spiritual constraints of the immigrant ghetto,'<sup>103</sup> while Gay Willentz recognises the 'generational conflict' in Jewish-American immigrant writing generally.<sup>104</sup> In presenting a heroine who seeks to escape and, through her language choices, establish an 'authentic and independent identity,'<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, pp 140, 78.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p.70 - the night before a boy's circumcision.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p.65 - a young Gentile male.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.53 - the morning washing of the hands; p.45 - a small space for prayer used by Hasidic men.

<sup>102</sup> Wirth Neshet, p.447.

<sup>103</sup> Gert Buelens, 'The Jewish Immigrant Experience,' *Journal of American Studies*, 25.3 (December 1991), 473 - 479 (p.467).

<sup>104</sup> Gay Willentz, p.33.

<sup>105</sup> Lievens, p.191.

Abraham is positioning her heroine in an already established tradition of Jewish-American writers, as well as one recognised in the female *Bildungsroman* of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

This theme of escape is fully developed in the second and third sections of *The Romance Reader*: Rachel's imaginative life and her domestic reality are paralleled in the narrative as a means of indicating more fully her 'constant negotiation' of these two worlds as she works through the systems of operation of both the Ultra-Orthodox world and her imagination.<sup>106</sup> The conflict between fantasy and reality becomes more pronounced with the development of the marriage plot. The romances read by Rachel traditionally end with marriage, but in her own narrative the first mention of the subject appears as early as Chapter 2 when Rachel is twelve and her father tells her 'It's good for you girls to practise keeping house [...] You'll need it soon enough'<sup>107</sup> reflecting Ultra-Orthodox belief regarding early marriage. Stephanie Levine describes marriage as 'the defining event in a Hasidic life,'<sup>108</sup> and Ayala Fader states how 'girls on the brink of adulthood [...] learn how to become modest Hasidic wives.'<sup>109</sup> *The Romance Reader* presents these beliefs about the importance of marriage in the Ultra-Orthodox world with increased seriousness in its middle and latter sections. It offers also a more subversive element in its treatment of Rachel's awakening sexuality and fantasy life.

Abraham describes her method and style in *The Romance Reader* as a parody of the romance genre in the way that it is punctuated by elements of fantasy in its structure; these serve to show Rachel's growing sexual awareness and her positioning of herself as

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p.191

<sup>107</sup> Abraham, p.16.

<sup>108</sup> Stephanie Wellen Levine, *Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers* (New York: NY University Press, 2003), p.75.

<sup>109</sup> Fader, p.179.

the heroine of her dream-encounters with the non-Orthodox men in her real life. Abraham temporarily disrupts the reader's sense of equilibrium by beginning Chapter 17 as if it is simply a development of the previous chapter but it quickly becomes clear that it is a parody in which Rachel is self-fashioned as the heroine of her own romance wearing 'red velvet shoes,' and 'black stockings [...] so soft and silky.'<sup>110</sup> This image clearly subverts the idea of the seamed, opaque stockings symbolic of the shared dress codes that form Ultra-Orthodox identity; these are the, often comic, focus of Rebbe Benjamin's desire to control his daughter. Rachel's adolescent fantasy is shaped through a confused narrative of a hero figure, a 'Mr Rochester,' who wears cowboy boots, drives a Jaguar, offers her at various points 'chowder [...] and dry sherry,' and who 'owns me [...] has me, all of me.'<sup>111</sup> There are a number of fantasy discourses at work here, using models of masculinity gained through reading, from a Gothic hero to an icon of the American west. Regardless of the provenance of the fantasy, the emphasis is on a female submission to male power in keeping with Barbara Cartland and Victoria Holt – a submission which Rachel will reject in the reality of her marriage to Israel.

Chapter 17 is not just a gentle burlesque of the romance genre, it is Rachel's awakening to her sexual self which, in Ultra-Orthodox society, must be repressed until she is traditionally married off to a suitable Hasid. By Chapter 22 marriage is no longer a mere aside in a conversation, it is framed in a direct question that Rachel must acknowledge, 'What kind of man do you want me to look for?' In a relatively short time, Rachel is confronted by the unassailable fact that marriage will be her future and changes her initial response of 'I'm not interested' to something more pragmatic in its seeming submission to normative authority, 'I don't care whom I marry.'<sup>112</sup> This

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<sup>110</sup> Abraham, p.164.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 165, 162,167.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 199, 204.

introduces a more complex treatment of the trope as Abraham merges fantasy and reality, the subversive and the normative into a discourse on marriage that exposes Rachel's naivety and inexperience both as a mainstream, seventeen year old heroine and an Ultra-Orthodox one.

Adrienne Baker writes of the position of girls in Ultra-Orthodox society generally that 'Prior to marriage, she was expected to pass from one protected status, that of daughter, to another, that of wife.'<sup>113</sup> Rachel's position as a, 'Chassidische daughter,' becomes more resonant in the build-up to the wedding.<sup>114</sup> Abraham imbues a greater sense of Rebbe Benjamin as a patriarchal figure where previously he has been presented almost comically as consumed by his studies, relatively lenient in matters of discipline and proud of Rachel when she becomes a 'real-life' heroine by saving the life of a child in her role as life-guard. By this point there is a growing hardness of tone in Rachel's narrative voice, a change that represents a stage in her struggle for authenticity of self. She recognises 'Everything always depends on what he wants' and is unapologetic about how she has alienated him, 'He speaks of me the way prophets speak of whores.'<sup>115</sup> By Chapter 23, the doubleness that has characterised Rachel in terms of her reading choices, use of language, her attitude to her parents and the oscillation between fantasy and reality, comes to a climax in her behaviour and attitude to her planned marriage

In the section that deals with the weeks prior to her engagement, Abraham focuses on Rachel's continuous dismissal of the realities of Ultra-Orthodox marriage negotiations.

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<sup>113</sup> Adrienne Baker, *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions* (Basingstoke; Macmillan, 1993), p.149.

<sup>114</sup> Abraham, p.254.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 179, 206.

She states defiantly ‘Married, I’ll do and wear what I want. I’ll be who I am.’<sup>116</sup> While Rachel continues to be configured in the recognisable mould of brave, out-spoken heroine, Abraham emphasises also her teenage confusion and unrealistic expectations, ‘Married is the only way to live on my own, in my own apartment.’<sup>117</sup> Her quest for *Binah* is shown to be unfulfilled at this stage; her response to her situation articulated through a romance-discourse which presents marriage as the happy conclusion of the story. The concept of the chosen groom-to-be begins to appeal to Rachel as part of this imagined, autonomous world of marriage: while she has not met with Israel and he remains an idea, she is accepting of the situation. She expresses desire for the intimacy of real marriage, ‘I want to fall in love,’ within the frame of her romance-reading, ‘like a woman in a novel.’<sup>118</sup> While the use of the term ‘woman’ suggests that Rachel is willing to accept the reality of her transition from Ultra-Orthodox girl-daughter to woman-wife, the use of the expression ‘in a novel’ reveals her as clinging to the world of fantasy and the ‘idea’ of Israel as her husband, not the reality. Abraham uses this parallel discourse of fantasy and reality to show the contradictions within Rachel when she meets Israel for the first time, ‘In books, the men are always tall and dark. Not like Israel’ and ‘I want him to be strong, a man in a novel. But he isn’t.’<sup>119</sup> The comic qualifications to each statement signpost the innate disappointment she feels on confronting reality.

By the time the engagement is confirmed, she is aware of the consequences of her decision, ‘I [...] said yes [...] to get away from my father and Ma,’<sup>120</sup> and simultaneously

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p.204.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p.221.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid* p.209.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid* pp. 216, 222.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid* p.230.

beginning to question everything she has read, ‘Novels are lies.’<sup>121</sup> This marks a further stage in Rachel’s *Bildungsroman* as she is forced to acknowledge her position as an Ultra-Orthodox bride. During the wedding itself, Rachel briefly finds the personal space she has longed for throughout the novel ‘behind the veil, I’m alone,’<sup>122</sup> but this is temporary and, once married, she is subject to the demands that she conform to the expectations of her husband and her father. Rachel quickly realises that her parents ‘already own’ Israel.<sup>123</sup> This section of the novel is where Abraham is most critical of Ultra-Orthodox practices. The stricture on Rachel’s owning of a radio is presented as merely petty and the failure to consummate the marriage is depicted sympathetically, explained as an outcome of the deliberate ignorance encouraged within Ultra-Orthodox power structures but the shaving of Rachel’s head to facilitate the wearing of a wig is brutal in its description of her looking ‘like Jews in concentration camps.’<sup>124</sup> The choice of imagery here is instructive both in its referencing an event so significant within Ultra-Orthodox self-perception, the Holocaust, and in the idea of a woman’s physical vulnerability and oppression. The shaving ritual is seen as an act of actual and symbolic violence perpetrated by Rachel’s mother on her daughter in order to fulfil patriarchal requirements. The mother-figure here is seen in collusion with male systems of authority in her aggressive enforcement of Ultra-Orthodox custom.

By Chapter 29, Rachel is determined to resist the normative Ultra-Orthodox power structure through radical direct action, ‘I will not remain in my father’s grasp [...] I want to live in a world with no men [...] no fathers, no husbands.’<sup>125</sup> Raised consciousness drives her flight in the penultimate chapter of the novel but escape is temporary,

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid* p.236.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid* p.246.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid* p.257.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid* p.256.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid* p.286.

consisting of one chapter, and Rachel finds freedom from Israel only by returning to her parents' home. This can be read as an act of unsatisfactory submission – the failed wife returns home as the dutiful daughter - but also as Rachel's epiphany, the beginning of a liberation through the awareness that 'I won't be here [...] for long'.<sup>126</sup> Whilst some critics have chosen to define Abraham's relation to Ultra-Orthodox life as essentially negative, 'an expose of religious fundamentalism' and 'voyeuristically [...] repellent',<sup>127</sup> *The Romance Reader* can be viewed as more nuanced in its attitude to the Ultra-Orthodox, and more balanced. In Rachel's return, Abraham is offering a conservative model of femininity as a means of eventually achieving a radical one. The concluding scene of the novel, similar to the other three novels in this dissertation, articulates a poignant sense of attachment to the normative world of tradition through Rachel's recognition of her love for the performative rituals of an Ultra-Orthodox home, 'I know this is what I'll miss when I go [...] Ma lighting candles, Father's kiddish'<sup>128</sup> and there is a sense of elegy in her father's narration of the Hasidic creation story.

Rachel's final words reflect the open-endedness of the *Bildungsroman* which has charted her narrative personal growth and shown her halting movement towards the intuitive self-knowledge that is *Binah*. When Rachel recognises her subversive longing for the unknowns of freedom, 'I wonder how high I will get' but simultaneously acknowledges the dangers inherent in leaving behind the security of all that is familiar, 'before I fall',<sup>129</sup> this articulates the parallel worlds, apparent throughout the novel, merging together. Abraham is revealing a new maturity in her heroine through this acknowledgement of the competing elements of the secular and the sacred, fantasy and

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid p.295.

<sup>127</sup> Lore Dickstein, 'The World of Our Mothers' Review of *The Romance Reader* NY Times Book Review (1995) [www.nytimes.com.1995](http://www.nytimes.com.1995) (accessed January 2016)

<sup>128</sup> Abraham, p.296. *kiddish* - ceremony

<sup>129</sup> Ibid p.296.



reality not as oppositional but as complementary. Although Rachel has not yet acquired *Binah*, Abraham presents her as having made an important realisation: while she is ‘of’ Ultra-Orthodoxy - in her love of the rituals, the history and the family which has formed her - she cannot live ‘in’ Ultra-Orthodoxy. This is because, like Abraham herself, Rachel possesses the ‘spirited intellectual curiosity’ of the mainstream fictive heroines in the books that women readers love to read.<sup>130</sup>

The tension between the maturing self of Rachel and her community is, to an extent, resolved in her acceptance of her need to leave her community while maintaining links with it. Although quite different, all four texts under consideration here are similarly interested in the ways that their heroines arrive at an accommodation such as Rachel’s. The writers’ examination of the choices and the compromises that their female protagonists make is part of the ‘constant negotiation’ of their experiences of duality as imaginative heroines and as observant women within Ultra-Orthodoxy<sup>131</sup>. Allegra Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls*, like *The Romance Reader* explores its heroine’s sense of ‘double-ness’ through an examination of the relationship between the collective requirements of Ultra-Orthodoxy and her individual need to find her identity within it. In Goodman’s text the focus shifts from a daughter to a mother and from adolescence to maturity in the configuration of Elizabeth Shulman, another central protagonist who is sensitive to the world of the imagination through a ‘deep reading [...] which reveals an inner identity’<sup>132</sup> and equally subject to the frustrations of the private and public ‘prescribed boundaries’ of her Ultra-Orthodox world.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Judy Bolton Fasman, ‘Pearl Abraham Branches Out’ *Forward Online Sisterhood* (2010) [forward.com/sisterhood/128262/pearl-abraham](http://forward.com/sisterhood/128262/pearl-abraham) (accessed February 2016)

<sup>131</sup> Lievens, p.191.

<sup>132</sup> Abraham in Rubin, p.228.

<sup>133</sup> Rubel, p.71.

## Chapter 2: The Woman of Valour Aishes Chayil

### *Kaaterskill Falls*: Allegra Goodman

‘Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.’<sup>134</sup>

‘Her, the most excellent of all’<sup>135</sup>

Like *The Romance Reader*, Allegra Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998) looks back to a 1970s’ Ultra-Orthodox community in the New York outer-suburbs but its interest lies in an examination of a different model of Jewish femininity, an already-matured mother of five, within a different model of Ultra-Orthodoxy - the elite *Mitnagdim*, the historic opponents of Pearl Abraham’s Hasidic community. To present this, Goodman relies not on the intense first-person voice of a *Bildungsroman* but on the authority of a covert, third-person narrator who offers a range of inter-connected characters where the sympathetic focus always returns to the heroine Elizabeth Shulman. Goodman’s method borrows from both the nineteenth-century canon in its narrative scope and ‘imaginative sympathy’<sup>136</sup> and the domestic novel tradition which ‘simultaneously privilege(s) and critique(s) the home,’<sup>137</sup> whilst ensuring that the narrative is ‘explicitly and extensively Jewish centred.’<sup>138</sup> This integrated model facilitates Goodman’s late twentieth-century critique of the quintessentially Jewish ideal of the *Aishes Chayil* in a 1970s American Ultra-Orthodox community regulated by a patriarchal constraint on female autonomy that was an accepted part of women’s experience in earlier centuries.

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<sup>134</sup> *Proverbs*, 31: 10-31, 15

<sup>135</sup> Coventry Patmore *The Angel in the House* (1854)

<sup>136</sup> Five Books, Interview with Allegra Goodman [com/interview/allegra-goodman-on-jewish-fiction/](http://com/interview/allegra-goodman-on-jewish-fiction/) (accessed March 2016)

<sup>137</sup> Chiara Briganti, ‘House-Haunting of the Inter-war Years’ in *The Domestic Novel*, ed. by Chiara Briganti (Toronto, University of Toronto, 2012), pp.147-168 (p.148).

<sup>138</sup> Meyers, p.9.

Like the other texts under consideration here, Goodman's 'inscribe[s] the possibilities of feminism to revivify rather than reject traditional Jewish life'<sup>139</sup> through a transformative reading of the *Aishes Chayil*. The complexities of this figure are explored through Elizabeth Shulman who, in the tradition of heroines who function both as affective and domestic such as Austen's Anne Elliot and Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, 'really is the heart of the book.'<sup>140</sup> This chapter examines Goodman's narrative focus on the power of Elizabeth's feeling, and her role as wife and mother in a context where domesticity is linked to the sacred, and the everyday rituals of Judaism are woven into the rhythms of women's lives. The trope of duality, central to *The Romance Reader*, is addressed also in *Kaaterskill Falls* through an exploration of how an Ultra-Orthodox heroine can use her 'over-powering, private yearnings' within the role of *Aishes Chayil*. Goodman poses the question 'Where is a woman to put her energies?'<sup>141</sup> in a community where 'the laws [...] create and enforce strict borders.'<sup>142</sup> The narrative presents duality as an innate aspect of the *Aishes Chayil*, most significantly through the relationship between the domestic and entrepreneurial aspects of the role. This chapter will consider how this duality is reflected both in the original Proverbs text and Goodman's configuration of her heroine within the traditions of the nineteenth century and domestic novel.

The *Aishes Chayil* is the Jewish Woman of Valour who is responsible for upholding in herself, and nurturing in her children, observance of the required commandments; she is central to the preservation of Jewish identity and values in the home. The gendered

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>140</sup> Ilan Stavans, 'A Fine Range of Motion with Allegra Goodman' in *Singer's Typewriter and Mine: Reflections on Jewish Culture* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), pp.299-309 (p.306).

<sup>141</sup> Mead, p.21.

<sup>142</sup> Tova Mirvis, 'Writing between Worlds' in *Modern Jewish Women writers in America*, ed. by Evelyn Avery (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp.241-247 (p.242).

separation of men and women and the attendant idealisation of women within domestic space is, however, not confined to Ultra-Orthodox practice; it is extant in social-conditioning from all times and places. Adrienne Baker argues that the mythic descriptions of women as the ‘angel in the house’ ‘reveals not who women really are but how women are made to appear and function from a male perspective.’<sup>143</sup> Thus Coventry Patmore’s hymn of praise to his wife’s virtues in *The Angel in the House* (1854) is not a blue-print for subsequent myths but rather expresses his imaginative response to one already extant, transmitted through treatises such as Thomas Gisbourne’s (1797), which describe the home as ‘the sphere in which [...] female excellence is best displayed.’<sup>144</sup> Judaism offers its own version of this ‘female excellence’ which merges the domestic with the sacred. Just as the Victorians created a ‘spectacle of intimacy’ through their attachment of supreme importance to the ideal of family life through a public valorisation,<sup>145</sup> so Judaism expresses this notion of domestic centrality through two different but linked constructions of the woman at the heart of the family.

The more generalised figure who rules over the household as the Matriarch is the *Baleboosteh*, meaning ‘an excellent and praiseworthy homemaker.’<sup>146</sup> This ideal of the homemaker is represented in a gendered discourse through the testimonies of sons who ‘romanticised the comfortable place where they [...] had no responsibilities’<sup>147</sup> and daughters whose memories of the kitchen often emphasised their mothers’ ‘constant drudgery’ - one Weinberg interviewee describes her mother as oppressive, ‘always

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<sup>143</sup> Baker, p.133.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (London 1797) 8415.g7 British Library online p.4.

<sup>145</sup> Karen Chase, Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2000)

<sup>146</sup> Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (London: Penguin, 1971), p.29.

<sup>147</sup> Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of our Mothers* (New York, Schocken Books, 1988), p.35

cursing and angry.’<sup>148</sup> This is reflected in literary texts also and Esther Kreitman in *Deborah* provides an unsentimental exploration of the ‘strange yearning [...] an almost physical gnawing’<sup>149</sup> that her narrator-heroine experiences as a result of domestic responsibilities in the context of shtetl poverty. Anzia Yeziarska similarly expresses her understanding of the limitations of a Jewish woman’s life by asserting, ‘A woman alone, not a wife and not a mother has no existence.’<sup>150</sup> It is unsurprising that anthropological and fictive evidence taken directly from women contradicts the idealised notions of ‘women and the domestic space that contains them’<sup>151</sup> as propounded by male testimony, not just because ‘myths about women are nearly always created by men’ but also because the lived reality of the domestic role is so much more complex than the conceptualisation of it.<sup>152</sup>

Fisher Roller identifies Ultra-Orthodox Judaism as providing an additional dimension to the construction of the *Baleboosteh*. The *Aishes Chayil* contains all the practical characteristics but within Ultra-Orthodoxy

domesticity is connected to religiosity. For a woman, home-making and raising children are seen as her way of serving God [...] the arena [...] in which she expresses her religiosity<sup>153</sup>

It is this combination of the practical and the spiritual that lends the *Aishes Chayil* her special qualities: wisdom and piety, energy and resourcefulness. She creates ‘an abode for God’s Presence’ which ‘extends through all Jewish generations to eternity’ as the

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<sup>148</sup> Weinberg, p.36

<sup>149</sup> Esther Kreitman, *Deborah* (London: Virago, 1983), p.7

<sup>150</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *The Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (New York: Persea Books, 1981), p.217

<sup>151</sup> Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Domestic Novel* (Albany: University of New York Press, 2007), p.2.

<sup>152</sup> Baker, p.133.

<sup>153</sup> Fisher Roller, p.152.

Jewish angel in the house, ‘a queen in her own realm of the home.’<sup>154</sup> Goodman’s reading of the role of *Aishes Chayil* in *Kaaterskill Falls* involves an examination of how this specific model of Jewish femininity can act also as a recognisable literary heroine with roots in two mainstream traditions. Although her background is not Ultra-Orthodox, Goodman has a strong sense of her own Jewishness and considers her writing to come from ‘the inside [...] ritual and liturgy are a natural part of my fictional world’<sup>155</sup> and Elizabeth is placed in the cultural and religious context of the *Aishes Chayil* through Goodman’s use of the nomenclature of Judaism which, as with Abraham, is offered with no glossary or explanation. Unlike Abraham, however, this is achieved through the narration rather than dialogue: Goodman’s characters’ speech is not littered with Yiddish phrases. Instead, un-italicised terms such as ‘shul’ and ‘davening’<sup>156</sup> are embedded seamlessly, creating the narrative of Ultra-Orthodoxy within which Elizabeth functions. Goodman also juxtaposes the specifically Jewish with the ordinarily domestic: Elizabeth’s ‘tiny siddur’ has pages that are ‘as thin as flaky pastry’ while her Sabbath table has six adult place settings and ‘the good Wedgwood Peter Rabbit bowl and plate’ for her youngest child.<sup>157</sup> These details emphasise the complete integration of Elizabeth’s Jewishness, her sense of self and her domestic role. She is the *Aishes Chayil*.

*Kaaterskill Falls* reflects Goodman’s clear awareness of the traditions of the nineteenth century novel with its emphasis on the ‘powerful authority of [...] narrator’<sup>158</sup> and its

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<sup>154</sup> Sara Esther Crispe, ‘The Role of women in Judaism: I am Woman’ [www.chabad.org/thejewish/woman](http://www.chabad.org/thejewish/woman), (accessed March 2016); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (London: Virago, 1978), p.14.

<sup>155</sup> Allegra Goodman, ‘Writing with a Return Address’, in *Who We Are: On Being (and not being) a Jewish American Writer*, ed. by Derek Rubin (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), pp.267-276 (p.271).

<sup>156</sup> Shul = synagogue; davening = praying.

<sup>157</sup> Allegra Goodman, *Kaaterskill Falls*, pp.10 (*siddur* = prayer book), 277.

<sup>158</sup> Blumberg, p.77.

interest in both the public and private identities of its heroines. Goodman has stated that she considers it to be ‘my version of *Middlemarch*.’<sup>159</sup> Lilian Furst describes the essence of nineteenth-century realist narrative as exploring ‘the interaction between the perceiving, feeling, reflecting self (and) their particular material and social world.’<sup>160</sup> Goodman is meticulous in her configuration of Elizabeth as this ‘feeling self’ in an Ultra-Orthodox context, a character with an inner life represented through her interest in the world, her aspirations for her daughters and her later disappointments. Through her interest in human motivation, a redemptive storyline and the centrality of family life, Goodman shows also a connection to the world of twentieth-century women writers such as Anne Tyler. Michiko Kakutani describes Tyler’s *Digging to America* (2006) as a ‘meditation on identity and belonging – what it means to be part of a family, a culture.’<sup>161</sup> This applies equally well to *Kaaterskill Falls* which is a domestic novel in its imaginative scrutiny of Elizabeth’s everyday world of domestic routines, but one concerned with Ultra-Orthodox identity. Elizabeth is presented as the *Aishes Chayil* heroine through her acceptance of her domestic responsibilities specifically as an Ultra-Orthodox woman and her focalised thoughts emphasise this, ‘Naturally, becoming a mother, keeping a Jewish home, is the most important thing.’<sup>162</sup>

Elizabeth is positioned in the tradition of heroines who are unremarkable of appearance but who possess a strong interior life. Goodman provides a physical outline: Elizabeth’s ‘hands are freckled [...] her glasses [...] gold-rimmed’ as well as details that position her in Ultra-Orthodoxy, ‘all her sheitels are auburn.’<sup>163</sup> Her distinctive feature is that ‘Her

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<sup>159</sup> Stavans, p.304.

<sup>160</sup> Lilian Furst, *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995), p.176.

<sup>161</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘Anne Tyler: Digging to America’ *The New York Times* (2006) [www.nytimes.com/2006/05/19/books](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/19/books) (accessed February 2016).

<sup>162</sup> Goodman, p.69.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, p.11 - wig.

accent is English' providing both a tangible link to the world of the literary heroines from which she is drawn and about whom she reads.<sup>164</sup> Elizabeth knows the English Canon and longs to spend 'stolen hours with Emma [...] or Lydgate,'<sup>165</sup> although Goodman places details of the emotionally disruptive effect that these books have on the otherwise conservative Elizabeth. They fill her with 'confused longings'<sup>166</sup> which do not fit easily into her role as the *Aishes Chayil* but echo the experiences of nineteenth-century affective heroines as well as those of Yeziarska and Kreitman.

A sense of Elizabeth's Englishness is established also in the configuration of the five Shulman daughters, who have their roots as much in *Pride and Prejudice*'s Bennet girls as they do in Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye* stories.<sup>167</sup> Although the girls are growing up as Ultra-Orthodox Americans, all have 'real names' that are English.<sup>168</sup> This emphasises Elizabeth's individuality and allows further reference to the nineteenth-century tradition: one daughter is 'Rowena', Scott's Saxon heroine in *Ivanhoe*, while the baby born at the end of the book, Chaya, is 'Celia' on her birth certificate, the name of Dorothea's sister in *Middlemarch*. Elizabeth believes that these English names lend her daughters the opportunity to 'have imagination' beyond the Kirshner world,<sup>169</sup> a wish influenced by her formative years in which, although brought up in a Yiddish-speaking, strictly observant home, she 'played tennis,' attended a boarding school and was encouraged by her family 'to move [...] and see things.'<sup>170</sup> Through these initial details of Elizabeth, Goodman positions her in the world of the nineteenth-century English

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, p.79.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>167</sup> Sholem Aleichem, 'Hodel' in *The Penguin Book of Jewish Short Stories*, ed. by Emanuel Litvinoff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), originally published 1894.

<sup>168</sup> Goodman, p.10.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p.10.



heroine and, in the course of the novel, Elizabeth is shown to possess the intelligent awareness of Jane Eyre,<sup>171</sup> the practical energy of Margaret Hale,<sup>172</sup> and the introspection of Anne Elliot.<sup>173</sup> However, these are younger women, like Abraham's Rachel and Ragen's Dina, and their novels show a movement towards self-knowledge and marriage through a series of challenges and conflicts, whereas Elizabeth is thirty-four at the start of her story, married for thirteen years and already the mother of five daughters. By placing the concerns of an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman at the centre of the text in order to explore the ambivalences of the feminine ideal of the *Aishes Chayil*. Goodman also adopts elements from the twentieth-century domestic novel and its greater interest in heroines who are already married and mothers.

Goodman's nuanced exploration of Elizabeth as *Aishes Chayil* uses two aspects of the Sabbath song as a central feature of the narrative. Firstly there is the domestic ideal of the homemaker who 'giveth meat to her household' and whose 'children [...] call her blessed'<sup>174</sup> in the domestic plot of the early chapters. There is also the entrepreneur whose 'merchandise is good,'<sup>175</sup> which both provokes Elizabeth's internal crisis, associated more with the heroines of the nineteenth century canon, and its resolution essential to the latter sections of the narrative. Goodman also provides two other models of the *Aishes Chayil* in *Kaaterskill Falls* as a way of positioning Elizabeth within the role. Although the description of Sarah Kirshner, the Rav's late wife focuses on her domestic piety it is one rooted in the material world of 'Limoges china' and the maternal sphere of her 'real passion'<sup>176</sup> for her sons, whereas Rachel Kirshner, the

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<sup>171</sup> Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

<sup>172</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Everyman, 1993).

<sup>173</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

<sup>174</sup> *Proverbs*, Chapter 31 verse 15.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 31: 18.

<sup>176</sup> Goodman, p.32.

Rav's nervous daughter-in-law has a sense of her failure in producing 'only one child' and invests her time and ambition in being a 'fiercely devoted wife.'<sup>177</sup> Goodman's narration suggests that in both examples the notion of the 'ideal' is unreliable and the intensity of both women is a negative energy. In contrast, the description of Elizabeth as a wife, mother and homemaker in the early chapters of the novel offers a sure sense of her nurturing energy suggesting that, despite her greater ambivalence within the role, she is closer to the authentic spirit of the *Aishes Chayil*

Goodman further explores the *Aishes Chayil's* domestic role through a critique of the mystic discourse of the *Lecha dodi*, 'the Friday night hymn [...] with its invitation to welcome the Sabbath as a bride.'<sup>178</sup> 'Come my beloved to greet the bride, the Sabbath presence,'<sup>179</sup> is chanted by Ultra-Orthodox men while the women perform the ritual of candle-lighting to usher in the sacred time. Maya Socolovsky describes *Kaaterskill Falls'* presentation of Ultra-Orthodoxy as an 'ultimate renewal' of its position in the Jewish-American literary tradition through Goodman's offering of positive images of women's involvement in religious life and her references 'to liturgy which praises rather than denigrates women.'<sup>180</sup> This is most evident in the choices of direct liturgical references throughout the novel, 'deep Jewish tradition [...] the poetry,'<sup>181</sup> and, more significantly, Goodman's descriptions of Elizabeth's personal religious belief as 'part of her. Its rituals are not rituals [...] but instincts.'<sup>182</sup> The emphasis here is not on Ultra-Orthodox identity as shaped through the performativity of collective practice but rather

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid, pp. 27, 146.

<sup>178</sup> John Gross, *A Double Thread; A childhood in Mile End and Beyond* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.27.

<sup>179</sup> Goodman, p.156.

<sup>180</sup> Maya Socolovsky, 'Land, Legacy and Return: negotiating a Post-Assimilationist Stance in Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls*, *Shofar* 22.3 (Spring 2004) Special Issue: Unfinalized Moments in Jewish American Narrative, 26-42 (p.40).

<sup>181</sup> Goodman, 'Writing with a Return Address,' p.276.

<sup>182</sup> Goodman, *Kaaterskill Falls* p.57.

a deeply personal religiosity which is then manifested through those public and domestic rituals.

Chapter Ten provides an evocative Sabbath scene in which to position Elizabeth's identity as *Aishes Chayil* where Isaac Shulman is 'amazed at the way Elizabeth makes their home shine.'<sup>183</sup> This offers a reverent image of the status of women within the ritual world of Ultra-Orthodoxy, similar to that in *Seven Blessings* where King-Feuerman emphasises how 'the beautiful verses [...] sweep[ing] the congregants up in its rhythm.'<sup>184</sup> The Sabbath song of praise to the mother is a weekly reminder of her virtues and in *Kaaterskill Falls* Isaac 'sees Elizabeth in that poem, the song everyone sings,' not just as a domestic figure but as the woman he loves.<sup>185</sup> Although Goodman's intention is to underline the happiness of the Shulman marriage and the beauty of the ancient words, she is aware also of the difficulties innate in such an idealised concept of the woman, evident in her wry description of the Shulman's Sabbath ritual where we are told that the rest of the family 'aren't listening to the words, no one really listens.'<sup>186</sup>

There is, however, another side to the Sabbath Song. A close reading of the *Aishes Chayil's* responsibilities described within it reveals a list of challenging tasks that range from waking in darkness to provide food for the family and planting a vineyard, to meeting the emotional needs of her husband so that 'he shall have no need of spoil'<sup>187</sup> the biblical equivalent of Gisborne's injunction to women to 'tend daily and hourly to

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p.157.

<sup>184</sup> King-Feuerman, p.12.

<sup>185</sup> Goodman, p.158.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p.158.

<sup>187</sup> *Proverbs* 31: 11.

the comfort of husbands'.<sup>188</sup> The *Aishes Chayil* is also cautioned against worldliness, 'beauty is vain,'<sup>189</sup> and reminded that her piety and virtue are paramount in reflecting her husband's reputation. The Sabbath Song, lyrical as it is, whilst ostensibly directed at the woman, describes all the tasks she carries out, not for herself but for her husband, placing him not her at the centre of the narrative.<sup>190</sup> Thus, it is possible to read the words of the Sabbath Song as a more androcentric text than it would first appear. Goodman is aware of the contradictions within the *Aishes Chayil* and in her representation of the Shulman's Ultra-Orthodox home she offers a subtle reading of the many aspects of the complex role.

The presentation of the Shulmans' married relationship is dramatically different from that provided by Abraham in *The Romance Reader* where Rachel's mother dismisses sex, 'You get used to it,'<sup>191</sup> or in *Sotah* where Dina's married sister feels 'a secret, shameful dismay.'<sup>192</sup> The Shulman marriage is established as physically and emotionally fulfilling: in the first description of them in public 'Isaac stands so close to her that her skirt brushes against him'<sup>193</sup> and later, when in private, he is described as 'her whole landscape, his body next to hers.'<sup>194</sup> Goodman presents these early details of Elizabeth's sexuality as a necessary foundation for her other public roles as *Aishes Chayil*, the most significant of which is that of mother and domestic provider. Similar to the other novels, *Kaaterskill Falls* is full of descriptions of food, both for festivals such as 'Rosh Hashanah [...]

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<sup>188</sup> Gisborne p.4.

<sup>189</sup> *Proverbs* 31: 30.

<sup>190</sup> *Aishes Chayil* performance by Eitan Katz 04/10/11 Youtube.

<sup>191</sup> Abraham, p.256.

<sup>192</sup> Ragen, p.70.

<sup>193</sup> Goodman, p.8.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, p.70.

challahs [...] honey cakes [...] noodle kugels'<sup>195</sup> and in catering to the individuality of children's tastes, 'Malki's with no tomato, Chani's with no cucumber.'<sup>196</sup> This provision of food is common in the descriptions of other *Aishes Chayil* but not always as nurturing. In *The Romance Reader*, Rachel's mother is functional as she 'opens two cans of sardines' and in *Sotah* Dina's mother is merely efficient in producing 'platters of steaming meats.'<sup>197</sup> Goodman, like Anne Tyler, is an 'exquisite chronicler of the everyday'<sup>198</sup> in her descriptions of Elizabeth's energy and engagement, whether it is the traditionally Jewish task of 'making blintzes' or spreading the American favourite, 'strawberry jam and peanut butter.'<sup>199</sup> There is an almost sensuous element to the language used to describe such mundane domestic tasks, elevating them to a symbol of nourishment that is spiritual as well as physical.

Elizabeth sustains and stimulates her daughters in other ways too through the 'excursions' of the holidays and helping 'find their books' in the library.<sup>200</sup> Goodman is not interested in creating Elizabeth as a maternal ideal but in exploring the breadth of the domestic role within Ultra-Orthodoxy, so that the frustrations and compromises of Elizabeth's world are included alongside the satisfactions. The relentlessness of the physical demands of motherhood are not ignored: Elizabeth is exhausted by rising 'at six to feed the three little ones' and is aware of 'the constant responsibility' of her role.<sup>201</sup> These details are common to all cultures, in all times and all places but by placing her heroine in a narrative

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid, p.138.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, p.138.

<sup>197</sup> Abraham, p.82; Ragen, p.16.

<sup>198</sup> Lisa Allardice 'Accidental Celebrity' *The Guardian* 2004 [www.theguardian.com/Arts/Books/Anne](http://www.theguardian.com/Arts/Books/Anne) (accessed March 2016).

<sup>199</sup> Goodman pp 11; .206.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid pp. 35, 52.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid pp. 100, 79.

of Ultra-Orthodoxy, Goodman is adding an additional pressure – the all-encompassing demands of ‘living the life prescribed to them.’<sup>202</sup> This means a variety of roles for the woman, including activity outside the home as a means of further supporting the life of the family. The entrepreneurial role within the *Aishes Chayil* allows Goodman to explore the greater complexities of feminine Ultra-Orthodoxy through the conflict Elizabeth experiences in moving beyond the domestic sphere.

Of the four writers under consideration here, it is Goodman who has attracted most critical attention. She was recognised as one of the ‘new wave’ of Jewish American writers in 2006 by Naomi Sokoloff and academics from Susan Jacobowitz to Gloria Cronin have produced detailed critiques of her position as a Jewish writer. Some critical readings of *Kaaterskill Falls* are intent on highlighting the feminism versus orthodoxy dichotomy: Bonnie Chase argues that ‘the crux of Elizabeth’s struggle (is) reconciling her developing feminism with the demands of her Orthodoxy’<sup>203</sup> but a more nuanced position identifies *Kaaterskill Falls* as one of a growing body of work by Jewish-American women writers that ‘demand that we revise our critical assumptions that feminism and orthodoxy are oxymoronic.’<sup>204</sup> Elizabeth’s crisis in the second half of the book grows not from a developing feminism but from a realisation of her position as Furst’s ‘perceiving self’ who, at thirty four recognises that ‘you don’t magically become something else when you are responsible for six children.’<sup>205</sup> Elizabeth’s crisis is not ideological; she is not as Cronin posits, ‘a woman whose religious commitments within patriarchy prevent recourse

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid, p.99.

<sup>203</sup> Bonnie Chase, ‘Fashioning a Feminist Identity in Allegra Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls*,’ *The Falconer* 8. (Spring 2007), 37-48 (p.44).

<sup>204</sup> Meyer, p.196.

<sup>205</sup> Goodman, p.282.

to American, secular feminisms,<sup>206</sup> but rather one who is struggling to assert the authentic identity submerged by the responsibilities of the *Aishes Chayil*. Ruth Wisse offers the most pertinent observation about the characterisation of Elizabeth when she describes Goodman's 'exposing of restlessness' as the key constituent that makes Elizabeth 'a genuine heroine.'<sup>207</sup> This restlessness is introduced early on through Elizabeth's reading of fiction and her need to believe that 'there are secret forests where you can become someone else,'<sup>208</sup> and then developed through the context of having freedom after thirteen years of child-rearing. Goodman is posing a more universal question, 'What are all the opportunities for someone who has only been a mother?'<sup>209</sup>

Goodman's choice to make the opening of a store the secret ambition of her heroine is in keeping both with the entrepreneurial traditions of the biblical *Aishes Chayil* and the mercantile world of the Eastern European *shtetl*. Historically the Sabbath Song extols the virtues of the woman who is not only a domestic ideal but who is accomplished in the world of work; she 'maketh fine linen' but also 'sellet it.'<sup>210</sup> In her study of women in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish society, Iris Parush looks in detail at 'social practices that placed women in storefronts or in the market square,'<sup>211</sup> and this established tradition is reflected in the other texts examined here. In *The Romance Reader* Rachel's mother is fulfilled by her job in a clothes store, in *Sotah* Rebbetzin Reich supports her family through her wool shop and in *Seven Blessings* Tsippi Krauthammer manages a grocery shop. Similarly, Elizabeth's ambition to run a store is in keeping with the

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<sup>206</sup> Cronin, p.123.

<sup>207</sup> Ruth Wisse, 'The Joy of Limits' in *Commentary* Vol 106 Issue 6 (December 1998), 67-8 (p.67).

<sup>208</sup> Goodman, p.13.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*, p.96.

<sup>210</sup> Proverbs 31: 24

<sup>211</sup> Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2004), p.39.

women's domestic *Mitzvot*; it allows her to provide for her community with the necessary rabbinically-endorsed kosher food. By running the store, the *Aishes Chayil* who 'giveth meat to her household'<sup>212</sup> widens her range so that the store becomes an extension of the gendered space of the home, working within the framed restrictions of *Kashrut*.<sup>213</sup>

Tova Reich identifies Elizabeth's struggle as one 'to reconcile her commitment to religious life with her attraction to the outside world,' while Rachel S Harris defines the central conflict of the novel as 'the dichotomy between maintaining the world of Judaism [...] and the desire to be free.'<sup>214</sup> But this is to reduce the novel's focus on Elizabeth to oppositional duality, the feminism versus patriarchy or secularism versus Orthodoxy debate. The store is not the outside world to Elizabeth, but a part of the Kirshner community that supports one of the essential elements in Ultra-Orthodox life, the provision of kosher food. Goodman repeats her use of the language of abundance in her descriptions of the sale to other *Aishes Chayil* of 'warm challahs [...] dozens of rugelach [...] briskets'<sup>215</sup> which represents more than food. It is part of the narrative of Ultra-Orthodoxy and Elizabeth is described as 'radiant, planning on the sofa' in the same positive language that describes her 'clear-eyed, smiling' at the Sabbath table.<sup>216</sup> This provides a definitive link between the two sides of the same Jewish identity, one that accommodates both the domestic and entrepreneurial within the role of *Aishes Chayil* and Elizabeth's conflict does not originate here. Just as Isaac's initial reservations about starting a store are economic and not predicated on the balance of power within the

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<sup>212</sup> Proverbs, 31: 15.

<sup>213</sup> *Kashrut* –regulations about preparation and distribution of food.

<sup>214</sup> Tova Reich, 'Religious Jews at leisure,' *New Leader* 81.11 (May 1998), 18-19 (p.19).

Rachel S Harris, 'From Feminist to Housewife and Back Again: Orthodoxy and Modernity in American-Jewish Women's Writing' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, ed. by David Brauner and Axel Stahler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 76-90 (p.78).

<sup>215</sup> Goodman, p.194.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid*, pp.93; 158.



marriage itself, so the crisis in the final third of the novel is not created by Ultra-Orthodox attitudes to the position of women. It is not ideological or doctrinal, it is a matter of parochial politics. Elizabeth loses her store because she caters for a private party, using merchandise from a company not endorsed by the Rav's office.

Goodman positions the loss of the store alongside Elizabeth's sixth pregnancy: together these create a fracture in her hitherto ordered existence. The narrative emphasises her feelings of loss of self, of being 'divided from what she used to be,'<sup>217</sup> through the privileging of one aspect of her role as *Aishes Chayil* – that of mother – over the entrepreneurial. Goodman does not present Elizabeth's position as a choice between feminist autonomy or orthodox obedience but as an individual sadness, a disconnection from her 'self'. The freedom that the store represented is subsumed by the maternal role for a sixth time, and the final section of the novel is an examination not of the tensions between the affective heroine and the *Aishes Chayil*, but the fracturing of Elizabeth's sense of identity as an *Aishes Chayil*. The loss of the store results in Elizabeth suffering a profound sense of alienation from the community that has defined her, 'she sits among them, but [...] feels perfectly alone'<sup>218</sup> and an inability to find pleasure in her domestic and religious obligations. Goodman does not offer a dramatic epiphany as she did earlier in the novel for the birth of the store, but rather a gradual unfolding over fifty pages of narrative of the complex introspection that her heroine experiences through her pregnancy and afterwards.

Performative ritual is important in bringing Elizabeth to an eventual renewal of identity. The private family traditions associated with the new baby are part of a healing process

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p.249.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, p.248.

and so too is the religious framework within which Ultra-Orthodoxy functions. As Elizabeth watches Isaac pray she understands that her role, while different from his, is equally a part of their religious tradition. While ‘she will not fold herself in a tallis’ to pray, she accepts that the permanence of their commitment to the wider community is part of their private identity too and that she ‘will never cast the life away.’<sup>219</sup> By the penultimate chapter of the novel she is busy in Grimaldi’s store, balancing the various elements inherent within her role as the *Aishes Chayil*. Elizabeth is not presented here in an idealised figure but as practical and clear-sighted like so many real ‘women of valour.’ Maya Socolovsky interprets the end of the novel as providing a sense of Elizabeth’s ability to work ‘within the circumscribed framework of orthodoxy.’<sup>220</sup> This can be read as a compromise, similar to that of Rachel in *The Romance Reader* and her return to the family, which presents Elizabeth as a heroine lacking in the emotional resources to transcend the conventions of authority within her community. But Goodman is interested in offering a conclusion rooted in the reality of Ultra-Orthodoxy, not an ending transcendent in its tragedy, like that of Edna Pontellier, or Emma Bovary.<sup>221</sup> It may be that Elizabeth’s critical self-discovery is an acceptance of limitation but it can also be understood as a positive choice. Barbara Ann Landress offers a fair assessment of Goodman when she describes her treatment of Ultra-Orthodoxy as emphasising ‘finding satisfaction within a rich tradition that demands preservation rather than describing oppression.’<sup>222</sup>

Susan Jacobowitz considers that the novel’s ending offers Elizabeth a freedom of sorts as although she ‘will not break from her community [...] she imagines that her daughters

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid, p.295.

<sup>220</sup> Socolovsky, p.44.

<sup>221</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899) Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1856).

<sup>222</sup> Barbara Ann Landress, *Her Glory All Within: Rejecting and Transforming Orthodoxy in Israeli and American Jewish Women’s Fiction* (Boston University Press, 2012), p31.

will’ and ‘that makes her hopeful.’<sup>223</sup> Goodman chooses to set her novel in the 1970s where the influence of Second Wave Feminism broadened debate to include a wider range of issues such as family, sexuality, the workplace and the Shulman daughters are growing up in this world, although shielded from it by Ultra-Orthodoxy. Elizabeth dreams that they ‘could be part one thing and part another’ and like Rachel in *The Romance Reader*, ‘take flight’ in a way that her generation of Ultra-Orthodox women have not.<sup>224</sup> In the configuration of Chani the eldest daughter, this appears to be happening. Like her mother she is interested in the world outside Ultra-Orthodoxy and the gift of a set of out-dated encyclopaedia offers her access to this so that ‘She will make the words come true [...] She will find a way.’<sup>225</sup> The discourse of determination here offers a more confident, affective Ultra-Orthodox heroine than her mother; there is a sense of entitlement in Chani that does not exist in Elizabeth.

In *Kaaterskill Falls*’ final pages, Goodman places Elizabeth in the heart of her family and her neighbours as they all ‘watch the lilac sky for the three stars that mean the end of Shabbes.’<sup>226</sup> This has a similar serenity to the final scene of *The Romance Reader* although Rachel intends her presence to be temporary. For Elizabeth, her place as the *Aishes Chayil* remains as part of a tradition that serves as a ‘strong presence in people’s lives,’<sup>227</sup> one in which countless generations of Jews have waited for the stars to show. This sense of the continuity of belonging is important to Goodman herself who whilst not Ultra-Orthodox, writes through ‘drawing on my heritage and my history.’<sup>228</sup> The final

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<sup>223</sup> Jacobowitz, p.94.

<sup>224</sup> Goodman, p.262.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p.312.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, p.321.

<sup>227</sup> Abby Ellin, ‘Writing in the Dark’ *The Tablet* 2008 [www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion](http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion) (accessed February 2016).

<sup>228</sup> Goodman, ‘Writing with a Return Address’, p.272.

line of the novel fuses this commitment to tradition with the essential domestic element of Elizabeth's story as the Shulman family 'walk home under the canopy of trees.'<sup>229</sup>

Both Allegra Goodman and Pearl Abraham present their Ultra-Orthodox heroines as internally conflicted rather than caught between the external polarities of the religious versus the secular or orthodoxy versus feminism. As such, their narratives are able to show the movement towards a reconciliation of the competing impulses of their heroines' interiority within the context of Ultra-Orthodoxy's public domain. Both novels examine the ways in which their heroines experience a crisis of identity and reach an individual accommodation with their wider community without collective interference or punishment. Naomi Ragen's interests in *Sotah* move more explicitly into a narrative of transgression and the writer's direct criticism of specific aspects of Ultra-Orthodox society. Ragen focuses on a further paradigm of Jewish femininity – the *Sotah* or alleged adulteress – while adopting conventions from another mainstream genre, melodrama. The third of the four texts considered in this study moves the configuration of the Jewish heroine from the pastoral idyll of New York State to an Ultra-Orthodox urban enclave in Jerusalem and from the domestic ideal to the domestic pariah – the demonization of the female in the 'spectacle of the Sotah'.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Goodman, *Katerskill Falls*, p.324.

<sup>230</sup> Andrew Durdin, 'The Spectacle of the Sotah: A Rabbinic perspective on Justice and Punishment' (Unpublished MA Thesis Georgia State University, 2007), pp 1 – 72  
[http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs\\_theses](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses)

### Chapter 3: The Fallen Woman: Sotah

#### *Sotah*: Naomi Ragen

‘And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness.’<sup>231</sup>

‘Domestic melodrama by its very nature is conservative [...] it argues for the preservation of the family and its traditional values.’<sup>232</sup>

Naomi Ragen’s *Sotah* (1992) presents an inversion of *Kaaterskill Falls’ Aishes Chayil* in its configuration of the Jewish heroine as a domestic deviant, the ‘fallen woman’ who is cast out of Ultra-Orthodox society. Whereas Abraham’s Rachel moves towards the wisdom of *Binah* in her *Bildungsroman* and Goodman’s Elizabeth rediscovers her essential self as *Aishes Chayil* in her domestic novel, Chapter 3 will focus on Ragen’s Dina Reich, her fall and her redemption. As in melodrama, Dina is the emotional core of this narrative and is shown struggling with her identity as an Ultra-Orthodox wife and mother. I will argue that it is significant that the novel operates through the conventions of nineteenth century melodrama, with its interest in public conceptions of virtue, but is contextualised within Ultra-Orthodoxy. The tropes of melodrama are particularly pertinent to Ragen’s presentation of the feminine struggle against an aggressive patriarchy and, just as domestic melodrama contains a, ‘protest against social oppression,’<sup>233</sup> so *Sotah* explores the tension between the extremes of patriarchal authority in the ‘Morality Patrol’ of Reb Kurzman and her heroine, within an Ultra-Orthodox world.

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<sup>231</sup> Numbers, 5: 11-31 - The Sotah passage

<sup>232</sup> Martha Vicinus, ‘Helpless and Unfriended: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Domestic Melodrama,’ *New Literary History* 13.1 (Autumn 1981), 127-143 (p.141).

<sup>233</sup> Michael R Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (CUP 1991), p.153.

As with the two previous texts, *Sotah* uses dualism as a central trope of its presentation of Ultra-Orthodox femininity and this chapter will suggest that this novel's interest lies not in an exploration of the interior, divided self of the heroine but on an understanding of what constitutes the sacred and the profane, the virtuous woman and the sinful through a focus on the external world of Dina's relationships with her husband Judah and her lover Noach. Like Abraham and Goodman, Ragen investigates the accommodations that Ultra-Orthodox women make in order to find self-realisation but her methodology in doing this, informed by her position on issues that face real Ultra-Orthodox women, differs in some significant ways: a more overt criticism of Ultra-Orthodox power structures, a more anthropological relationship to her material and a greater use of biblical inter-textuality.

Ragen's anthropological approach to her subject is evident through a juxtaposition of the dramatic narrative with dense passages that explain Ultra-Orthodox practices and traditions. These reflect an awareness of her non-Orthodox and non-Jewish audience and their need for context, whilst simultaneously demonstrating Ragen's own familiarity with the Ultra-Orthodox world through the use of such details as spelling the word 'G-d' with a missing vowel.<sup>234</sup> This renders Ragen's Ultra-Orthodox world more distinctively 'orientalised' than Abraham's or Goodman's, whose depictions are normalised through the narrative embedding of cultural and religious details. Edward Said's definition of Orientalism as a privileged western attitude to the perceived inadequacies of near-eastern societies is equally valid when applied to a Modern-Orthodox writer's presentation of Ultra-Orthodoxy for a largely non-Orthodox audience.<sup>235</sup> *Sotah*, unlike *The Romance Reader* and *Kaaterskill Falls*, emphasises the

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<sup>234</sup> This denotes the rule that the word itself cannot be written in full because it represents a being so great and powerful.

<sup>235</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003)

‘otherness’ of Dina’s world through its insistent focus on the intricacies of *tzniut*, the symbolic variations of dress codes and the complexities of what is properly kosher, presenting the Ultra-Orthodox as exotic, archaic and, as the plot develops, sinister and dangerous.<sup>236</sup>

The presentation of the Ultra-Orthodox in Ragen’s novels can be understood as facilitating what Rubel describes as an ‘urban curiosity’ about these religious communities within wider society,<sup>237</sup> similar to the voyeurism and sense of distorted difference displayed by western societies for the eastern ‘other’ extant in Said’s model of Orientalism. It can be argued that by adopting the tropes and discourse of melodrama, Ragen over-simplifies the complexities of Ultra-Orthodoxy as a way of appealing to ‘the desire of secular readers for unflattering information about the Orthodox’<sup>238</sup> and that by providing ‘a narrative structure which focuses on a heroine’s quest for love’ her writing is limited to the conventions of women’s ‘mass-market’ writing.<sup>239</sup> However, by placing the ritual of *Sotah* at the centre of her narrative, she is highlighting the ways in which melodrama and ancient Judaic rites share key features, particularly notions of female virtue and sin. Biblical inter-textuality is, therefore, another key methodology used by Ragen and *Sotah*’s title, the term used to describe the elaborate ritual that the alleged adulteress underwent as a response to her husband’s suspicion or jealousy, reflects a procedure intended to discover the truth of a private matter in a public way with a woman at its centre. This is similar to many melodrama plots where the wronged

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<sup>236</sup> *Tzniut* = modesty.

<sup>237</sup> Rubel, p.94.

<sup>238</sup> Tamar Al-Or (1998) quoted in Barbara Ann Landress, *Her Glory All Within: Rejecting and Transforming Orthodoxy in Israeli and American Jewish Women’s Fiction* (Boston: Boston University Press, 2012), p.76

<sup>239</sup> George Paizis, *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction* (Macmillan 1998), p.29.

woman must demonstrate her innocence by undergoing a series of challenges because, 'Who carries the sign of virtue? A woman.'<sup>240</sup>

Brian Britt describes the 'extensive discussions of Sotah in the Talmud' as indicative of 'a level of interest beyond what is accorded to most passages of its length' resulting in 'a hermeneutical process that confronts readings with counter readings.'<sup>241</sup> The academic work extant in this field reflects this position through interpretations which accept the *Sotah* as either a misogynistic or a proto-feminist paradigm. Whereas Andrew Durdin accepts the 'interpretative strategies of the rabbis' as describing an 'economy of justice and punishment',<sup>242</sup> Judith Hauptmann infers that 'it sets up a legal procedure that [...] will never be implemented'<sup>243</sup> and Tikva Frymer Kensky interprets the process as helpful to the accused because 'placing punishment for infidelity in divine or priestly hands [...] protected women from the violence of jealous men.'<sup>244</sup> Thus, the central driving point of Ragen's plot is rooted in an ambiguous narrative of ancient ritual that reflects Ultra-Orthodoxy's sense of connectedness to its past and its complex attitude to the position of women.

This ambiguity is evident also in Ragen's two other Haredi novels which, together with *Sotah*, reflect a second biblical reference point in the symbolic significance of their heroines' names which position them as the victims of men. *Jepthe's Daughter* (1989) and *The Sacrifice of Tamar* (1994)<sup>245</sup> share with *Sotah* both a biblical and a tabloid

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<sup>240</sup> Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women – Images of Women in Theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p.86.

<sup>241</sup> Brian Britt, *Male Jealousy and the Suspected Sotah: Towards a counter-reading of Numbers 5:11-31* (2011), p.3 [novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojsbct/index](http://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojsbct/index) (accessed December 2016).

<sup>242</sup> Durdin, p.1.

<sup>243</sup> Judith Hauptmann, *Re-reading the Rabbis* (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), p.15.

<sup>244</sup> Tikva Frymer Kensky, 'The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah Numbers 5, 11-31' *Vetus Testamentum* XXXIV Ann Arbor (1984), 11 – 26 (p.2).

<sup>245</sup> Jepthe's nameless daughter is sacrificed by her father in order to win victory in battle in Judges 11: 30-39; Tamar is raped and vilified by her half-brother in 2 Samuel: 13.



provenance. Taking as her starting point stories about Ultra-Orthodox scandal in the Israeli tabloid press, Ragen reconfigures these through the use of a biblical discourse that contextualises them within Judaism but also adds elements of melodrama by offering a redemptive ending. *Sotah*'s heroine is named after Jacob and Leah's daughter Dinah who is assaulted and then punished by both the men responsible for the crime and those who should defend her. By providing her protagonist with a biblical name that means 'vindicated' or 'judgement,' Ragen positions her character within a specifically Jewish narrative of female struggle as well as that of melodrama. Dina is a heroine who, in her victimisation by a self-appointed 'Sanhedrin,'<sup>246</sup> her branding as a Sotah and her continued pious observance when exposed to secular society, is specifically Ultra-Orthodox but one who operates also within the conservative conventions of melodrama. Dina is both the *Sotah* and the 'fallen woman', isolated and humiliated but finally exonerated as her 'reward of virtue.'<sup>247</sup> Like Abraham and Goodman, Ragen is offering both Jewish and conventional literary elements as part of the construction of her Ultra-Orthodox heroine.

The duality that is an essential element in the construction of the four Ultra-Orthodox heroines in the novels under consideration here, is extant also in the four writers and their position both within Judaism and the wider literary context in which they operate. In Naomi Ragen, this duality is evident through her own negotiation of the tensions between the religious and the secular, the traditional and the modern; her biography reveals a complex Jewish identity culminating in an adoption of Modern-Orthodoxy as a reaction to the perceived lack of individual freedom offered by Ultra-Orthodoxy. *Sotah*'s Dina Reich reflects a similar transition in her narrative journey towards

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<sup>246</sup> Ragen, p.321.

<sup>247</sup> Booth, p151.

feminine self-realisation which ‘promotes the ideals of Modern Orthodoxy’ where ‘one can be an observant Jew and live alongside the greater culture.’<sup>248</sup> Ragen has written and broadcast extensively about her political and religious position within Judaism: she is critical of the protocols on Ultra-Orthodox buses which demand that women sit in divided sections at the back of the vehicle and has written about child abuse, domestic violence and the lack of women’s participation in ritual, viewed by Ultra-Orthodox communities as antagonistic and sensationalised.<sup>249</sup> Ragen, however, positions herself as an Ultra-Orthodox ‘insider’ when she states ‘I know what I’m writing about’ and, aware of her reputation within the Ultra-Orthodox establishment, defends her position, stating her respect for a community characterised by ‘dedicated self-sacrifice and commitment to spiritual growth.’<sup>250</sup>

This has little impact on Ultra-Orthodox women critics such as Malka Schaps who will not read Naomi Ragen ‘because she is so hostile’ to Ultra-Orthodox values and considers her plot lines an appropriation of the subject.<sup>251</sup> Schaps understands her own Ultra-Orthodox position as providing an authentic representative voice from within the community and, therefore, views Ragen’s writing as part of an ‘Orthodox sub-culture [...] rarely sympathetic and rarely reflecting the actual problems of the community.’<sup>252</sup> Rubel is equally sceptical of Ragen’s insider status when she states, ‘Writers profess membership in order to authenticate their authority’ and Ragen ‘was not raised in the community and she chose to leave.’<sup>253</sup> Both these positions deny the existence of other

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<sup>248</sup> Rubel, p.90.

<sup>249</sup> Naomi Ragen, ‘Moving Backward: A Look at Mehadrin Bus Lines.’ (Nov 3 2009) failedmessiah.typepad.com/...moving-backward (accessed June 2016).

<sup>250</sup> Sharon Mor, ‘What’s New LA: Interview with Naomi Ragen’ (English version) (31/10/13). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?V=X4Em> (accessed December 2016)

<sup>251</sup> Malka Schaps: Email (6<sup>th</sup> October 2015).

<sup>252</sup> Malka Schaps, *The Filtered Voice Genre Shifts in Orthodox Women’s Fiction* (2003) u.math.biu.ac.il/~mschaps/filtered (accessed December 2015).

<sup>253</sup> Rubel, p.107.

narrative possibilities in depicting the community and seem to insist on one grand-narrative that accurately presents Ultra-Orthodoxy. Their argument assists in providing a context for an understanding of the worlds of the four novels by the articulation of an inward-looking, defensive position with regards to the community and its representation by anyone not considered a part of it.

Non-Orthodox critic Barbara Ann Landress offers a more nuanced reading of Ragen's position, describing her as a 'liminal' figure whose awareness of the variety within Jewish religious experience provides her with an insight that creates 'crusading, formulaic fiction' producing an audience response that is 'deemed either moderately conservative or highly inflammatory depending on the social context in which (it is) read.'<sup>254</sup> Naomi Sokoloff excludes Ragen from her overview of new Jewish writing which features both Abraham and Goodman in a selection of 'literary' novelists, although she does include her in an online Jewish Women's Archive article as producing fiction that 'creates a striking intersection of Jewish values and secular ones.'<sup>255</sup> This references the duality within the writer herself, not just the writing, and recognises that the variety within Ragen's experience provides her fiction with a greater resonance regarding Ultra-Orthodox and non-religious matters and thus able to reach wider audiences. Sokoloff recognises another element in Ragen's novels that facilitates this when she positions Ragen as popular and middlebrow, 'promising sensationalism'<sup>256</sup> and similarly Landress acknowledges this 'mass market' appeal which relies on 'cliché [...] and limited character development.'<sup>257</sup> Thematically and

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<sup>254</sup> Landress, pp. 72, 30.

<sup>255</sup> Naomi Sokoloff Introduction to American Jewish Writing Today, *AJS Review* 30:2 (2006), pp227-230; Jewish Women's Archive, Popular Fiction by Jewish American Women' <https://wa.org/encyclopedia/authors/sokoloff-naomi> (accessed June 2016).

<sup>256</sup> Sokoloff, 'Popular Fiction.'

<sup>257</sup> Landress, p 72.

stylistically, Ragen clearly has greater popular appeal than the other three writers considered in this study but harsher critics, such as Tamar Al-Or and Katrinka Blickle<sup>258</sup> accuse her of offering ‘salacious’ and ‘sentimental, sordid’ plots which appropriate and exploit the Ultra-Orthodox context, as well as plagiarising some of the material for *Sotah*.<sup>259</sup>

This critical reception of her books stands in opposition to Ragen’s conception of herself as a writer. She makes a robust defence against critical disdain, defining her own position as that of a serious writer ‘washed clean of (the) prescriptiveness’ of critical opinion, which she considers contemptuous of popular fiction.<sup>260</sup> She describes herself as inhabiting a ‘literary no man’s land’<sup>261</sup> and yet identifies her strongest influences as texts from the canon

Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* [...] provided strong, admirable women facing adversity in a closed society [...] Anna Karenina [...] doomed in a closed society [...] DH Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. [...] Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*,<sup>262</sup>

Ragen believes that her novels offer similar narratives of the female struggle for self-realisation, as well as performing a consciousness-raising function with regards to Ultra-Orthodox concerns. However, this understanding of her writing and that of her most hostile critics, disregards a central element of her methodology in *Sotah*. Her adoption of the characters, language and tropes of nineteenth century melodrama, as well as the

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<sup>258</sup>Tamar Al Or quoted in Landress p.76 and Katrina Blickle in [www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/ragen-naomi-1949-0](http://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/ragen-naomi-1949-0) (accessed June 2016).

<sup>259</sup> Naomi Ragen was accused in 2007 of plagiarising a novel about Jerusalem Ultra-Orthodoxy by Sarah Shapiro. [www.haaretz.com/jerusalem-court-finds](http://www.haaretz.com/jerusalem-court-finds) (accessed November 2015).

<sup>260</sup> Mor, Youtube.

<sup>261</sup> [www.naomiragen.com/Articles/orthoworld.htm](http://www.naomiragen.com/Articles/orthoworld.htm) (accessed November 2015).

<sup>262</sup> Naomi Ragen: Email (28/08/2015).

women's sensationalist novels of the 1860s within a framework of women's 'mass-market' fiction, facilitates Ragen's construction of Dina both as a recognisable heroine from the conventions of a nineteenth century popular tradition and one who operates as an Ultra-Orthodox model.

Like Rachel Benjamin and Elizabeth Shulman, Dina Reich is centrally positioned in Ultra-Orthodoxy through the layered details of religious and cultural mores in the narrative. Here Ragen offers a juxtaposition of the notions of virtue and sin in the public world of Ultra-Orthodoxy rather than the struggle for private identity which is central to Abraham's Rachel and Goodman's Elizabeth. Alongside this imaginative creation of a distinctively Ultra-Orthodox world, Ragen configures Dina as a heroine who shares many of the features of both the normative heroines of nineteenth century melodrama who are, domestic, moral, pure, and the transgressive central characters in women's sensationalist fiction who possess a dangerous beauty and desire for freedom.

At the start of *Sotah*, Dina is presented as the former - a heroine of melodrama who embodies the 'integrity and moral purity'<sup>263</sup> of the dutiful daughter, similar to Dickens' Amy Dorrit whose 'tiny form' is replicated in the description of Dina's 'tiny, almost childlike' appearance.<sup>264</sup> Dina shares Little Dorrit's 'even temper' and her 'obligations to family'<sup>265</sup> but as the plot develops, Ragen introduces a capacity for self-sacrifice in Dina as strong as Hardy's Tess who 'Nobody blamed [...] as she blamed herself.'<sup>266</sup> This is presented as part of the narrative of Ultra-Orthodoxy as much as it is of melodrama, which has at its centre a 'virtuous, saint-like woman',<sup>267</sup> with Dina, as a pious

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<sup>263</sup> Ferris, p.87.

<sup>264</sup> Ragen, *Sotah* p.8; Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.94.

<sup>265</sup> Ragen, pp 8,.22.

<sup>266</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974), p.62.

<sup>267</sup> Ferris, p.87.

woman, believing her planned adultery to be ‘her sin only.’<sup>268</sup> Ragen further adds a contradictory element to this configuration of Dina, more aligned to the sensationalist heroines of 1860s. Like Braddon’s Lucy Graham and Mrs Henry Wood’s Lady Isabel Vane, Dina has a beauty that brings with it temptation and a transgressing of the rules of society, followed by the misery and punishment which are traditionally played out within the constraints of nineteenth century society, but here transposed to twentieth century Ultra-Orthodoxy. *Sotah* charts the development of Dina from the innocence of the melodrama heroines who are ‘not hungry for [...] new experiences’ to those of sensationalism who have a subversive awareness of their sexuality, ‘in her eyes [...] there was a look of strange triumph.’<sup>269</sup> It is at this point of confluence that Dina moves from the conservative Ultra-Orthodox daughter to the transgressive figure of the Sotah.

Ragen is aware of the dramatic potential in combining an orientalist insight into an enclosed ‘other’ society with the conventions of melodrama which ‘appeal to the [...] emotional and imaginative life’ of its audience through locating narratives ‘in the historical past or a foreign country.’<sup>270</sup> Ragen uses both the historical past of the ancient *Sotah* ceremony, with its dynamic of the accused woman subject to male judgement, and the mystery of Ultra-Orthodox life and practice as a foreign country which, while in close physical proximity to the secular world of Israeli or American cities, is isolated both psychologically and emotionally. Historical and geographical distance is also used through introducing the Reich family’s ‘wanton ancestor’ as a framed narrative

It was in Poland. Her name was Sruyele [...] She was like a Sotah! She ran off with another man.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Ragen, p.276.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, pp.38, 198.

<sup>270</sup> Booth, p.151.

<sup>271</sup> Ragen, pp. 154, 11.

Dina is deeply affected by the story and acutely sensitive to the idea that it will foreshadow her own experience, ‘The yawning pit of sin [...] lay in wait.’<sup>272</sup> Thus Ragen weaves a number of details into this first chapter, highlighting the tropes of the wider novel but most importantly establishing Dina as the heroine of the narrative and the focus of the reader’s sympathy. Nora Rubel is unconvinced by Ragen’s characterisation and particularly critical of Dina as a heroine who possesses ‘few original thoughts’ and is ‘very concerned about other people’s opinions.’<sup>273</sup> This observation fails to recognise the importance of the external world in *Sotah*, as in melodrama more generally. Ragen is not offering a narrative of interiority here but, instead, focuses on the public nature of Ultra-Orthodox life, played out in a tightly interconnected community where the privacy of the individual is subordinate to collective identity. The opinion of others carries a particular resonance and influence. This is important in the shaping of all four Ultra-Orthodox heroines but is particularly significant to the configuration of Dina as a character who transgresses her society’s code.

As in traditional melodrama, Dina’s virtuous beauty defines her as a ‘focus of male sexual desire’ and this is central to the novel’s main interest.<sup>274</sup> Dina’s age, seventeen, and her childlike physicality, which is constantly referenced by descriptions of her as ‘petite and fragile’ and ‘a lovely piece of china’ are important in establishing Dina’s physical and psychological vulnerability,<sup>275</sup> a central feature of the heroines of melodrama. Through the narrative’s developing focus on other characters’ perceptions of Dina, the ‘male gaze’ is introduced which reflects how the ‘liminality of the

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>273</sup> Rubel, p.90.

<sup>274</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens’ Villains: Melodrama, Character and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.230

<sup>275</sup> Ragen, pp 7, 18.

adolescent girl makes her simultaneously disturbing and attractive to patriarchy.<sup>276</sup>

Ragen references Dina's adolescent 'liminality' throughout *Sotah*, particularly in the focalisation of various male perceptions. When the Matchmaker Reb Garfinkel considers possible partners for Dina he recalls her as 'Like a little doll. Some men like that.'<sup>277</sup> This adds a voyeuristic element to the presentation of the heroine, an objectification of her both as a product for the marriage-market, which denies her a human reality and suggests male manipulation and control, and as a child-woman which has a more sinister connotation of paedophilic desire.

This is further developed through the presentation of Dina's relationships with two polarised models of maleness: the 'sacred' virtue of the husband and the 'profane' sin represented by the lover. Ragen works within the conventions of melodrama to construct the two Ultra-Orthodox men as binary opposites in their physicality, their attitudes and their intentions, but the way in which they are described in their response to Dina is similar. Judah is drawn to Dina's 'exquisite womanly body' while Noach is 'stunned' by her 'exquisitely small and fine,' features.<sup>278</sup> This narrative repetition of 'exquisite' establishes a discourse of female fragility which emphasises the childlike delicacy of Dina's physicality and echoes Reb Garfinkel's description of her as 'doll-like'. This is further evident in Judah and Noach's common description of Dina as 'a little dove' and 'a lovely little bird' which, although drawing on a more benign metaphor from nature rather than the manufactured form of the doll, suggests a sense of male possession of, and power over, the female body as 'the ultimate prize.'<sup>279</sup> Brian

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<sup>276</sup> Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth Century Popular Culture* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), p.23 [scholarworks.wmich.edu/wmuBooks/Books/225](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wmuBooks/Books/225) (accessed July 2016).

<sup>277</sup> Ragen, p.91.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 127, 225, 231.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 223, 279, 232.



Britt uses a similar discourse when he describes the ritual of the *Sotah* as one in which the woman was ‘treated like a living mannequin by the men’ through the authority they have over her.<sup>280</sup> When Dina is exposed by the Morality Patrol, they are able to treat her in just such a way because ‘This is our power.’<sup>281</sup>

The oppositions in the configuration of Judah and Noach are the most significant element in Ragen’s exploration of Dina as a heroine within the landscape of Ultra-Orthodoxy. Judah is presented as reticent and inexperienced with women, a man who ‘racked his brains for something to say’ whereas Noach is the experienced adulterer, a voyeur who ‘stare(s) across at the vision’ and dazzles Dina with his ‘astonishing words.’<sup>282</sup> Where Judah is clumsy, though ‘handsome’ with an, ‘imposing height and broadness [...] like a bear’ Noach is ‘tall and slim [...] with a musky scent’ and the ‘thick black hair and deep blue eyes’ of a romance hero.<sup>283</sup> One of them is embedded in the Jerusalem world of Ultra-Orthodoxy, working in Meah Shearim and praying three times a day, while the other takes Dina to East Jerusalem, ‘a foreign place, full of Arabs’ where he speaks ‘Hebrew the Israeli way’ in contrast to the ‘guttural Yiddishisms’ of Judah.<sup>284</sup>

These opposing models of Ultra-Orthodox maleness are central to Ragen’s representation of Dina as a specifically Ultra-Orthodox heroine, offering her a stark choice between the normative and the transgressive in her society. One detail is all-important in Dina’s conflict: while Judah has a ‘lowly status as a working man [...] not

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<sup>280</sup> Britt, p.3.

<sup>281</sup> Ragen, p.321.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 126, 229, 281.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 112-3, 263, 226.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 295, 261.

in a Kollel at all,' Noach is 'a *Talmid Chachem*, a scholar.'<sup>285</sup> In focusing on this, within a plot that is strongly influenced by the conventions of mainstream melodrama, Ragen is recognising a central tenet of the reality of Ultra-Orthodox women's experience: the way in which self-worth is predicated on the husband's status as a learned man.

Adrienne Baker observes that 'The Jewish woman has traditionally acquired merit through her men.'<sup>286</sup> Within this context, Dina's awareness of her relatively low esteem within the public world of her community because her husband is an artisan and not a scholar is 'an embarrassing admission of complete and utter failure.'<sup>287</sup> This has greater resonance for her than the satisfactions of her private life with her husband and in highlighting this, Ragen is offering an authentic example of the complexities of Ultra-Orthodox life; one that leads her heroine to make a disastrous choice. It is significant that Dina's transgression is partly fuelled by this norm of Ultra-Orthodox life rather than the external sexual temptation common to melodrama, sensationalism or romance.

Dina's temptation is, however, a central part of Ragen's narrative of Ultra-Orthodox melodrama but Ragen positions the heroine's growing sense of her sexuality in a context of marriage before the theme of adultery is introduced. Ragen establishes clearly her teenage heroine's growing self-awareness of her sexuality but in a different way to that of Abraham's Rachel in *The Romance Reader*. Dina does not have Rachel's vicarious experiences through reading, but marriage-preparation classes make her wonder if she has 'a more sensual nature than most women?' and her first experience of the *mikveh* combines her 'new sense of holiness' with 'a new love for her [...] body.'<sup>288</sup> Although she is terrified on her wedding night, unlike Abraham's Rachel she is 'wholly

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid, pp. 220.276.

<sup>286</sup> Baker, p.132.

<sup>287</sup> Ragen, p.220.

<sup>288</sup> Ragen, pp. 178.183.

consumed' and feels the 'surge of pleasure' that makes her 'reach out to him once more.'<sup>289</sup> Thus, Ragen combines the Ultra-Orthodox injunction to women to respond to their husband's sexual needs with the romance discourse of erotic ardour and complete fulfilment. The 'long nights [...] of [...] passionate companionship '<sup>290</sup> with Judah continue up until the point when she becomes aware of Noach for the first time so that, although the narrative establishes the religiously devout wife Dina as already sexualised, she is 'both pure and ripe'<sup>291</sup> when eventually 'their eyes met. And lingered.'<sup>292</sup>

A different discourse is used in Part 2 of the novel which reflects Rubel's identification of Ragen's 'New Jewish Gothic' in its focus on the darkness and dread of Dina's 'fall.'<sup>293</sup> Dina experiences no pleasure as she looks at Noach 'across the dark abyss' but feels that 'she could not escape' as she is 'annihilated.'<sup>294</sup> Ragen adds to this Dina's moral sense and religious awareness as 'Her shame began to grow' and she fears, 'G-d will cut me off. I am lost.'<sup>295</sup> Here the discourse of victimhood configures Dina as a heroine of melodrama whilst simultaneously privileging her religious position through her sense of guilt and the consequences of that guilt, isolation from God and from her community. This is enacted within a context of Ultra-Orthodoxy generally but, more particularly, male authority, manifested through the 'Morality Patrol' who stand 'silently, watching.'<sup>296</sup> Nora Rubel recognises that it is this malign male power that is the real focus of 'Ragen's scorn' and criticism in *Sotah*,<sup>297</sup> rather than the Ultra-

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid, pp. 207, 208.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, p.221.

<sup>291</sup> Nash, p.23.

<sup>292</sup> Ragen, p.248.

<sup>293</sup> Rubel, pp. 80-108 - Section on Jewish Gothic

<sup>294</sup> Ragen, pp. 266, 272, 304.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, pp. 311, 296.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid, p.299.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, p.299.

Orthodox world as a whole or Noach as the individual villain. This phenomenon of real-life religious vigilantism and male authority is used as a backdrop to the melodrama as a means of centralising her heroine as a victim within both patriarchy and Ultra-Orthodoxy.

This is most evident when Dina is confronted by Reb Kurzman, the leader of the Morality Patrol, and the chapters set in New York that follow this. Here she is forced to acknowledge a secular society which confirms her belief in the values of 'real' religious practice that give 'her life, a richness and depth' rather than the authority of Kurzman which is 'ugly, base.'<sup>298</sup> Through an encounter with the newly-Orthodox Rabbi Eliezer, she finds the moral courage to return home to Jerusalem to seek forgiveness. In this section of the narrative, Ragen's didactic purpose is embedded through a presentation of issues that resonate with the real Ultra-Orthodox community, authoritarianism, hypocrisy and zealotry, but through the use of the conventions of traditional melodrama. Dina's condemnation by the vigilante group positions her as a modern Sotah, accused, found guilty and sentenced by a patriarchal power that represents only a section of the community. Ragen's narrative voice is intent on denunciation, not simply in support of her heroine but as a means of exposing the punitive justice that is unchallenged within the Ultra-Orthodox community.

Robert Heilman defines melodrama as 'a kind of war [...] against injustice or for survival'<sup>299</sup> and for Ragen this is played out through the oppositional forces of Ultra-Orthodoxy, the authoritarian Kurzman and the compassionate Rabbi Eliezer. Dina's physical fragility, established in the early chapters of the narrative, takes on a

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<sup>298</sup> Ragen, pp. 433, 449.

<sup>299</sup> Robert Heilman, p.46 (1973) quoted in J.L.Styan, *Drama, Stage and Audience* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), p.72.

psychological form as she adopts the passivity of the traditional melodrama heroine in her confrontation with Kurzman, before whom she feels ‘hypnotized with horror’ and ‘powerless [...] in the hands of a great, implacable force.’<sup>300</sup> The discourse of physical and emotional entrapment used to describe Dina’s encounters with Noach, is mirrored and intensified here in order to emphasise Dina’s internalisation of the Ultra-Orthodox laws of modesty through her social-conditioning as an observant woman. She does not seek to defend herself from the accusation but rather accepts both patriarchal authority and its condemnation of her as ‘her upbringing [...] combined to defeat her, to take away her resistance.’<sup>301</sup> This reflects the female role in melodrama which is located in self-denial and renunciation as ‘The chief duty of woman [...] was to sacrifice herself.’<sup>302</sup> Kurzman’s argument echoes this trope when he demands a written confession from Dina and her acceptance of exile, the equivalent of the ritual undergone by the Sotah to reveal guilt or innocence. Ragen later references this explicitly when Dina’s dialogue expresses her shame, ‘I wish [...] I could drink the bitter waters.’<sup>303</sup> As her ‘sin endangers the whole community,’<sup>304</sup> she must accept her status as the Sotah of Jewish tradition but also that of melodrama’s ‘fallen’ woman who has disgraced and humiliated the family. In both roles, Dina must become ‘a stranger to herself.’<sup>305</sup>

In charting Dina’s journey from damnation to redemption, the chapters in New York highlight two tropes evident in Ragen’s other fiction and her journalism: the unnecessary constrictions enforced on individuals by Ultra-Orthodoxy and the dysfunction of some areas of secular society. Landress describes the latter as a counter

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<sup>300</sup> Ragen, pp. 320, 321.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, p.323.

<sup>302</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Woman’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.13

<sup>303</sup> Ragen, p.459.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid, p.320.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, p.351.

narrative that is ‘critical of secular culture as nihilistic, unproductive and damaging to family’<sup>306</sup> but Ragen is more even-handed in her depiction of these two worlds than this suggests. Dina is the conduit through which these are presented as part of the narrative argument for a balance between the two that, for Ragen, lies in Modern-Orthodoxy rather than the rejection of one or the other, as Abraham’s Rachel chooses. Ragen reflects this compromise in *Sotah* as a mutual notion of ‘otherness,’ explored in relation to Ultra-Orthodox practice as alien within the understanding of it by the secular world, and the way the Ultra-Orthodox position the secular and the non-Orthodox Jewish world as an existential threat to their traditions.

The Rosenheim family, with whom Dina lives on the Upper East Side, represents the metropolitan, assimilated Jewish elite who are suspicious of and embarrassed by the visible Jewishness of Ultra-Orthodoxy. This section of the narrative offers a didactic dialogue between the secular and the religious through Dina and Joan Rosenheim, who possesses many of the attitudes extant in the real world of Jewish secularism. She is horrified by Dina’s first appearance, ‘a child refugee [...] in a long-sleeved, wrinkled dress,’ and perplexed by the contradictions of the ‘flashy, Barbie-doll wig’ as a symbol of modesty.<sup>307</sup> But she is also impressed by Dina’s stoicism and her commitment to values and beliefs that the Rosenheims have lost, so that Joan is slowly drawn to an understanding of Judaism’s ‘ancient claim.’<sup>308</sup> Similarly, Dina is vocal in her disapproval of her adoptive family whose ‘secular knowledge corrupts’ and she is assiduous in maintaining her traditional dress code and observation of the Sabbath.<sup>309</sup> However, she is presented also as becoming gradually aware of a ‘worm of doubt’ as a

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<sup>306</sup> Landress, p.71.

<sup>307</sup> Ragen, pp 331, 373.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid, p.381.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid, p.370.

result of her growing cultural education through exposure to Joan's world of New York's theatres, galleries and concert halls which leads her to a greater understanding of how she wants to express her religiosity.<sup>310</sup>

Dina's epiphany comes when she accepts Rabbi Eliezer's judgement on her, 'You aren't an adulteress' and this facilitates her return home to seek forgiveness.<sup>311</sup> The final chapter of the novel takes place ten years later when Dina, Judah and their family are settled in an artists' colony in Safed, a town associated with Kabbalah study which overlooks the Sea of Galilee. The natural beauty of this location is a contrast to the claustrophobic intensity of Jerusalem and is part of Ragen's narrative of feminine liberation, achieved through Dina's new-found sense of independent identity. The epilogue of *Sotah*, provides the reconciliatory ending required by the conventions of melodrama but offers also a suitably redemptive conclusion for a religious heroine who has moved from youth to maturity, fragility to strength. By the establishment of Dina's continuing commitment to an observant Jewish community but one removed from the extremes of Meah Shearim, Ragen – like Goodman in *Kaaterskill Falls* - seems to be offering a conservative message. But for Dina, as for Elizabeth Shulman, this is presented as an act of personal autonomy as she chooses the kind of Judaism that she wishes to follow, one which recognises her individuality as well as her piety and sense of tradition. For Ragen's Jewish heroine this observance will be in The Galilee rather than Jerusalem, and within a Modern - rather than an Ultra-Orthodoxy.

If Ragen's narrative concludes its Ultra-Orthodox heroine's quest for happiness through love and religious practice by moving beyond Jerusalem, Ruchama King-Feuerman's

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<sup>310</sup> *Ibid*, p.370.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid*, p.428.

novel, whilst similarly focusing on her heroine's search for fulfilment, limits the action to a milieu that is part of the historical and political narrative of Judaism: Jerusalem's old city. In *Seven Blessings*, as in *Sotah*, Jerusalem is the heart of the Ultra-Orthodox world but whereas Ragen depicts it as ultimately oppressive to Dina Reich, to King-Feuerman's Beth Wilmer it is magical, offering her the possibility of spiritual renewal and a happy ending. The Modern-Orthodoxy of *Sotah*'s denouement becomes the starting point of *Seven Blessings* through the configuration of a heroine who has come to the same point of religious commitment as Dina Reich but through the opposite route. Whereas Dina moves into the Modern from the Ultra, *Seven Blessings* places Beth as part of a *Baal Teshuva* group which has moved from the USA to a life of new-found observance in Jerusalem where the narrative focus is on the quest to find both religious and romantic fulfilment in the world of Ultra-Orthodox match-making.



## Chapter 4: The Repentant: Baal Teshuva

### *Seven Blessings: Ruchama Feuerman-King*

‘Soon may there be heard in [...] the streets of Jerusalem  
The voice of joy and gladness  
The voice of the bridegroom and the bride’<sup>312</sup>

‘The wishes, the hopes, [...] of the small band of true friends who  
witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union’<sup>313</sup>

Chapter 4 moves this study from the melodrama of *Sotah* to a critique of the world of romantic comedy of manners, through Ruchama King-Feuerman’s concentration on a religiously-observant Jewish community defined by Modern-Orthodox rules in *Seven Blessings*. Here, the focus is not on a punitive ancient rite, as in *Sotah*, but on the search for the *besherete*, the one chosen by God, through Jewish match-making. Comedy of manners is a genre which focuses on the values and customs within a specific group where behaviour is codified and the notion of the collective is central to the action while romantic comedy of manners is defined by a ‘localization of the action’ which ‘situates the characters simultaneously within [...] romantic settings and the minutiae of domesticity.’<sup>314</sup> Both are particularly apposite as a frame for an exploration of the ritualised behaviour and self-fashioning of Modern-Orthodoxy, where social-conditioning is strong and ‘all important dimensions [...] of everyday life are predetermined’ in a regulated frame.<sup>315</sup> The locations of the novel are important in reflecting its major tropes of religion and marriage within the romantic comedy of manners framework: the old city of Jerusalem represents the ancient traditions of

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<sup>312</sup> *Sheva Bracha* – one of the seven blessings of the marriage ceremony

<sup>313</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p.465

<sup>314</sup> Paizis, p.176.

<sup>315</sup> Davidman, p.49.

Judaism which the characters seek to affirm through commitment to their community, while the outlying Jerusalem Forest serves a purpose similar to that of Shakespeare's Forest of Arden as a site of freedom and mystery where misconceptions, disguise and, ultimately, reconciliation through marriage take place.

Judith Lewin identifies the central focus of the novel as the '*Baal Teshuva* movement and religious dating scene of Americans in Israel.'<sup>316</sup> *Baal Teshuva*, or 'Master of Return' describes secular or less-religious Jews who choose a new life of observance of Jewish Law. King-Feuerman's additional use of a Modern-Orthodox community as the setting for her *Baal Teshuva* heroine, rather than the more established Hasidic and Mitnagim communities of the other three novels, offers a context shaped by adherence to Torah but committed also to the State of Israel, a more inclusive attitude to aspects of the secular world and one where women's roles are less rigidly defined than in *The Romance Reader* or *Sotah*. This allows King-Feuerman to examine the psychological and cultural complexities of the centrality of Jewish marriage in the newly-observant world, rather than merely presenting a 'dating scene' and the novel's title reflects this through its reference to the chanting of the *Sheva Bracho* or seven blessings, at the heart of the liturgical moment of the marriage ceremony.

Rachel Brownstein says of the nineteenth century novel's marriage plot that 'a single heroine and her deciding whom to marry always implies it is important to decide carefully, and possible to choose correctly.'<sup>317</sup> This chapter will focus on how King-Feuerman adopts conventions drawn from comedy of manners to present the decisions and choices of Beth Wilmer's quest for love and religious fulfilment as a single Jewish

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<sup>316</sup> Judith Lewin, 'Diving into the Wreck'. Binding Oneself to Judaism in Contemporary Jewish Women's Fiction', in *Shofar*, 26.4 (2008), 48-67 (p.1).

<sup>317</sup> Brownstein, p11.

woman who ‘yearned to be married.’<sup>318</sup> Thus, the social group that is presented and scrutinised in the novel is a Modern-Orthodox *Baal Teshuva* group which, although more outward-looking, is still confined by codes for the regulation of external observant behaviour, the domestic sphere and the interior world of faith. In *Seven Blessings*, the prevailing interests of the main characters are moved from the sex and money of conventional comedy of manners to marriage and faith, and the happy ending is achieved not by those with ‘the most style, the sharpest wits’ but those who acknowledge the truth of their feelings and the strength of their belief.<sup>319</sup> Hirst identifies comedy of manners as ‘the most anti-romantic form of comedy’<sup>320</sup> but in *Seven Blessings* the use of the conventions subverts this making marriage, not deception or adultery, normative and the desired end of the characters.

The duality that operates as a central trope of the other three novels under consideration is evident in *Seven Blessings* through Beth’s search for a partner and the ensuing conflict between doubt and faith. This leads her to question both her belief in the Torah and the possibility of finding a genuine soul mate as ‘the desirable is unobtainable, and the obtainable is undesirable.’<sup>321</sup> As an observant Jew from her middle-teens, Beth conforms to what is required by the many commandments but she is aware that this striving for obedience limits her choices and leads her to question not only the practicalities of her strict adherence to the Law, but also whether it is part of a divine plan, ‘Did God approve of the barren life she was leading?’<sup>322</sup> This carries with it both a poignant sense of the threat of spinsterhood that haunts nineteenth century heroines, and the Jewish belief that to be single is not part of God’s intention. Beth at 39, an age when

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<sup>318</sup> King-Feuerman, p.85.

<sup>319</sup> David L Hirst, *Comedy of Manners* (London: Methuen, 1979), p.2

<sup>320</sup> Hirst, p.2

<sup>321</sup> King-Feuerman, p.43.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid*, p.192.

some Ultra-Orthodox women would be grandmothers, has ‘never allowed a man to touch her’ and is trapped by her solitariness. Her religious doubts mirror a personal loneliness and ‘to say – I want, I need – was so hard.’<sup>323</sup> King-Feuerman’s plot is, however, essentially optimistic. Beth’s initial unhappiness is a starting-point to a narrative that works as an elaborate dance in a way similar to Shakespeare’s romantic comedies such as *Much Ado about Nothing* with Beth and Akiva moving towards each other, then away and finally finding one another again under the wedding canopy of the final scene.

In line with the other three novelists featured in this study, King-Feuerman explores her particular interest in models of femininity within contemporary Ultra-Orthodoxy, drawn from her own experience of such communities. Her key interests lie in an examination of the relationship between romantic love and religious faith within Modern-Orthodoxy and the approach to women’s participation and value within religious practice, as well as their position within domestic space. Although the plot features a mixed cast of characters, the narrative focus is on women’s experience of Jewish religious identity with Beth Wilmer at the centre who, like Goodman’s Elizabeth Shulman, seeks self-realisation through religious observance and Jewish marriage, but has doubts about both. Her relationship with two supporting female characters, Tsippi Krauthammer and Judy Bartovsky who share a role both as the wives of Torah scholars and match-makers within the community, is also emphasised. This element is informed by King-Feuerman’s understanding of how the *Baal Teshuva* movement offers women ‘creativity and deep friendships [...] intellectual inquiry and spiritual/emotional growth’<sup>324</sup> but it also exposes the pressures on women to conform within the framework of

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid, p.192.

<sup>324</sup> Miriam Bradman Abrahams, ‘Interview with Ruchama King-Feuerman’ (29/10/2014). [www.jewishbookcouncil.org/blog/The../post/interview](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/blog/The../post/interview) (accessed December 2016).

societal expectations, especially in relation to marriage. For Beth, these female relationships are essential as she lacks the family structures that are evident in the other three novels and while this provides a freedom that the other heroines lack, this absence of family positions her outside the norms of Ultra-Orthodox life.

The treatment of the Beth-Akiva plot-line follows recognisable romantic comedy of manners rules: a pair of sympathetic and well-matched lovers who do not recognise their suitability, the misunderstandings and obstacles that follow this and, finally, the lovers' recognition of their compatibility that concludes in the social ritual of marriage. However, the wedding at the end of *Seven Blessings* reflects more than the promise of regeneration found in Shakespearean comedy or the personal happiness and domestic security of a Jane Austen final chapter. King-Feberman's Modern-Orthodox context provides a more complete resolution through the binding of Jewish marriage which brings with it the fulfilment of God's plan for his chosen people. It offers continuity through its traditions and the promise of the new life that comes from marriage to ensure group survival for Jewish Orthodoxy.

King-Feberman's attitude to her subject differs from other fictive treatments of *Baal Teshuva*, which focus on the disruptive effect of new-found observance, through its insider-position which accommodates a more sympathetic treatment of her characters and their situations. The context of *Seven Blessings* is King-Feberman's own world from the age of 15 when she adopted her 'unique identity'<sup>325</sup> and, like Naomi Ragen, created a new life for herself in Israel.<sup>326</sup> Debra Kaufman describes the process of being a newly-observant Jew as an 'odyssey' and King-Feberman highlights this in her

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<sup>325</sup> Bradman Abrahams.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

configuration of Beth Wilmer.<sup>327</sup> Adapting aspects of her own lived experience such as the pathway to Orthodoxy and work in a psychiatric hospital in Jerusalem, she adds elements of heroines taken from Shakespeare and Austen, such as Beth's intelligence and independence which mask deeper complexities and insecurities. Together, these chart the heroine's narrative journey in-and-out of religious certainty and her longing for more than the functional state of marriage in her 'desire for a soul mate' which King-Feberman recognises as 'universal.'<sup>328</sup> This combination of both spiritual and romantic longing in Beth reflects the novel's understanding that religious faith and worldly love are inter-linked within a Jewish context, with human love mirrored or elevated by divine love. Through the use of elements borrowed from the Canon, such as the individual search for identity and love, and those that are more specifically Jewish, the desire for spiritual and religious as well as personal happiness through marriage, *Seven Blessings* blends genre features to construct Beth as a distinctively Modern-Orthodox heroine.

The creation of a fully-imagined Jewish context is achieved through a consistent embedding of nomenclature and liturgical language within the narrative and dialogue. The objective is to 'capture this world in a lived sense [...] without overly explaining it' in a way similar to Abraham and Goodman, rather than the intrusive density of Ragen's additional information in *Sotah*.<sup>329</sup> There is no use of italics for Yiddish and Hebrew words and no glossary, but King-Feberman provides a wealth of place names and liturgical references to create a sense of her Ultra-Orthodox world, as well as the fluid use of subordinate clauses in English which explain a term such as 'shochet' or

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<sup>327</sup> Debra Kaufman, 'Coming Home to Jewish Orthodoxy: Reactionary or Radical Women' in *Tikkum* 2.3 (1987) pp60-63 p.60.

<sup>328</sup> Bradman Abrahams.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

‘shidduch.’<sup>330</sup> *Seven Blessings* uses a scriptural discourse much more fully than the other three novels of this study, reflecting King-Feuerman’s particular interest in the relationship between women and Torah study and Modern-Orthodoxy’s more inclusive attitude to women within scholarship. Naomi Safran refers to sacred texts ‘Midrash Rabbah [...] Mishna Brura,’ as an active practitioner of her religion, and Judy Bartovsky worries that her husband did not offer a ‘dvar Torah’ at their Sabbath meal: Tsippi Krauthammer doesn’t understand ‘a word of Aramaic, but the men’s Torah study nourished her,’ while Beth is moved to tears by the ‘Lecha Dodi part’<sup>331</sup> of the Sabbath service. None of these are explained and the narrative assumes that a reader will either know what they are or accept them as part of the richness of story-telling, reflecting King-Feuerman’s confidence in using the narrative of Orthodoxy.

Jewish context is also created through the way in which the heroine is introduced in Chapter One, with the action set on a Friday, moving into evening and the coming of the Sabbath. In this way, and through a detailed evocation of the streets of Jerusalem’s old city, Beth is positioned as part of an essentially Jewish context but then developed through the narrative’s focus on two characters’ views of her as a heroine. This method facilitates the establishment of all the major tropes of the novel through King-Feuerman’s early identification of her particular concerns: her heroine’s relationship with religion, her place in a community of other observant women and her position within Jerusalem’s matchmaking protocols. The first thing that Tsippi Krauthammer notices about Beth is her hair, ‘an anomaly in this street of yarmulke, scarf, wig,’ and she ponders whether Beth is ‘the only uncovered woman over twenty on the block.’<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> King-Feuerman, p.7 *shochet* meaning Ritual slaughterer, p.3 *shidduch* meaning match-making.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, pp 33 *Midrash* – the ancient rabbinical commentaries on Torah; 18 *Dvar Torah* - a weekly insight into a Torah portion; 7; 13 *Lecha Dodi* – Liturgical song recited at dusk on Friday.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid, pp. 4, 5.

These are not casual observations but rather a reaction to an aspect of Beth's appearance that acts as a signifier of something more important: she is unmarried and she is relatively old, details that are impossible to ignore in this Ultra-Orthodox community.

References to women's head-coverings feature throughout the narrative in *Seven Blessings* and they reveal more than just fashion or practicality, they position the women ideologically in a sub-group within Ultra-Orthodoxy and often reflect a state of mind. Naomi Safran's headscarf is 'festive and sparkly', flashing 'little sequins of light' when she is first introduced but later she is described as wearing 'a severe blue beret' while Tsippi chooses to cover her short hair with a homely 'paisley scarf.'<sup>333</sup> The all-women concert that Beth attends offers a comprehensive array of head-coverings on display, 'the bewigged, the bereted, the scarved [...] and bare-headed like herself,'<sup>334</sup> reflecting the different codes that operate in the Ultra-Orthodox world to construct religious identity and offer a public expression of that identity.

Beth's physical appearance is further developed through Judy Bartovsky's unflattering comic description of her 'thrown together look, with shirts never tucked into skirts' and 'flat, horsey [...] shoes.'<sup>335</sup> As a match-maker, Judy builds on Tsippi's response to Beth's uncovered head by interpreting it as a sign of her own failure to help Beth achieve the status of a married woman. As a woman she is horrified at the loneliness of Beth's position as 'a virgin at thirty nine.'<sup>336</sup> Rabbi Aron Moss describes the covering of a woman's hair as having 'a profound effect on the wearer' and King-Feurman's

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<sup>333</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 32, 34, 68, 4.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid*, p.105.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.



configuration of Beth reflects the inverse of this.<sup>337</sup> Beth is humiliated by the attempts of the ‘entire city always plotting to marry her off’ and frightened by the idea of becoming ‘less and less marriage-worthy’ as she continues to be bare-headed.<sup>338</sup> Her resentment conceals fears which she can express only when alone in the Jerusalem Forest where she wonders whether ‘with a scarf on her head she’d be able to reveal herself.’<sup>339</sup> Just as ‘by covering her hair, the married woman makes a statement’ which creates a ‘cognitive distance between her and strangers,’ in the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy having uncovered hair signifies aloneness, a distance from others rather than a closeness.<sup>340</sup> Beth’s unmarried state alienates her within her community but also from the ‘self’ she wants to be.

King-Feuerman has written that she is

attracted to singles, especially older singles. They’re in limbo [...] It’s so much more than guy meets girl [...] when it’s overlaid within a *frum* framework,<sup>341</sup>

In *Through the Wall* (2016), *Baalat Teshuva* film director Rama Burshtein chooses a similar constituency: a newly-religious woman’s desperate search for a husband, driven by the ‘conviction and faith’ that God will provide.<sup>342</sup> Burshtein explains that she chose romantic comedy as a way of telling her Ultra-Orthodox narrative because it ‘make(s) us happy’ and provides the frame for a story where hope wins over despair and belief over doubt.<sup>343</sup> King-Feuerman is similarly optimistic in her presentation of Beth’s

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<sup>337</sup> Aron Moss, ‘What’s with the Wig?’ Chabad.org (10/01/17) [www.chabad.org>Learning](http://www.chabad.org/Learning) (accessed January 2017).

<sup>338</sup> King-Feuerman, pp. 36, 37.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid, p.45.

<sup>340</sup> Moss.

<sup>341</sup> King-Feuerman, Blog Homepage Entry for 06/06/2014 - *Frum* meaning strictly observant (accessed June 2016).

<sup>342</sup> Jason Solomons, ‘Rama Burshtein – Cinema’s Chief Rabbi’ in *Jewish Renaissance* (January 2017) 33-34 (p.33).

<sup>343</sup> Ibid

position, while recognising the pathos of the singles' plight. As the women at Beit Shifra Yeshiva, *Seven Blessings* is the only novel of the four where a Yeshiva is feminine space, debate a point of Torah interpretation about marriage, Judy Bartovsky admits 'It really is a kind of Jewish taboo to be single, which is very painful.'<sup>344</sup> A discussion follows which concludes that 'When a man and woman become reconciled to one another [...] *that's* what completes and forms the basis of the entire creation.'<sup>345</sup> This suggests that in the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy, being unmarried is more than a sense of an incomplete existence, as shown through Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* for example, it is unnatural, the 'other' and excludes a woman from the 'unique and distinct nature' which finds its fulfilment in the state of marriage.<sup>346</sup> This view is supported by both Tzippi Krauthammer when she tells Beth that a Shidduch is 'from God, and I am just the agent that brings it about,' and Judy's husband, when he says 'First there's nothing, and then there's a couple. The highest form of creation.'<sup>347</sup> Kaufman's interviews with *Baal Teshuva* women confirm the authenticity of this position, with one of her subjects suggesting that 'marriage is at once a personal and a sacred act' while another states that it is 'the symbol of the highest relationship possible.'<sup>348</sup> Fader, on the other hand, reveals a more utilitarian approach to marriage in Ultra-Orthodox girls, emphasising the material rather than the sacred aspect of marriage that brings 'an increase in social status.'<sup>349</sup>

King-Feuerman positions Beth's dilemma within this mixed context. It is not just a personal and domestic disappointment at having no husband and no home, but one

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<sup>344</sup> King-Feuerman, *Seven Blessings* p.72.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid*, p.75.

<sup>346</sup> Davidman, p.48.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 22,128.

<sup>348</sup> Kaufman, p.305.

<sup>349</sup> Fader, p.174.

rooted in a social-conditioning which teaches that for a woman to be unmarried is as much a religious failure as a personal one. Beth's unhappiness about her single state at 39 is accompanied by a crisis of faith expressed in 'chronic religious anxiety.'<sup>350</sup>

Although as a situation this is the inverse of Goodman's depiction of Elizabeth Shulman's profound self-alienation at the loss of her store and confirmation of her sixth pregnancy, the authorial tone and presentation is similar. Both writers seem to be suggesting that within Orthodoxy, women's personal happiness and religious faith are inextricably linked but, whereas Goodman provides a more ambiguous ending for her heroine, the reader of *Seven Blessings* knows that Beth is suffering Steiner's 'small desolations'<sup>351</sup> and moving towards a more traditionally happy conclusion through King-Feuerman's romantic comedy of manners framework.

This framework is most successful as the means of creating the many-faceted Modern-Orthodox world through which Beth must navigate. King-Feuerman provides insights into both individual and collective *Baal Teshuva* behaviour and the dictates of observant propriety, from the 'nouveau Hassid' meeting a blind date and Beth's insecurity in not knowing for certain 'who *really* kept kosher,' to Akiva's disapproval of his religious-from-birth room-mate's casual attitude to the morning hand-washing ritual, 'He never stopped to consider the act.'<sup>352</sup> The narrative also offers gently ironic vignettes of some aspects of Ultra-Orthodox behaviour that reveal the existence of an intense and satisfying private life through the description of 'Deliah's Lair,' a lingerie shop that provides for customers who 'underneath black, dour Hasidic clothing' are 'slinky sex kittens,'<sup>353</sup> and Tsippi's new-found courage in joining her Torah-scholar husband by

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<sup>350</sup> King-Feuerman, p.8.

<sup>351</sup> Cronin, p1.

<sup>352</sup> King-Feuerman, pp. 64, 29, 11.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid*, p.167.

pushing ‘aside the shower curtains’ and stepping in.<sup>354</sup> Elsewhere there are references to the rivalries and tensions that characterise any close-knit society, such as Judy Bartovsky’s sense of professional competition with Naomi Safran whose dynamic teaching is based on her belief that ‘a woman who doesn’t engage in Torah learning dooms herself to spiritual stagnation’ and Beth’s neighbour, Estrella Abutbul, who as a Sephardi Jew, is dismissive of the Ashkenazim who ‘don’t know how to sing, not like we do.’<sup>355</sup> These are part of a narrative that offers glimpses of a world that is considered ‘other’ but is in many ways comically familiar to all readers.

It is against this backdrop that King-Feuerman presents her affirmative view of her characters. Like Abraham and Goodman’s novels, *Seven Blessings* is set in the recent past of 1980s, which positions it within the context of Second Wave feminism and the beginnings of the greater freedoms and opportunities for women achieved through feminist activism. Kaufman’s anthropological work of that decade identifies the relatively affluent and well-educated Jewish women, like Beth, who embraced Ultra-Orthodoxy at this time to be ‘similar [...] to the [...] middle class, educated women [...] who populated the feminist movement.’<sup>356</sup> There is opportunity here for a fictive examination of the tensions, contradictions and anxieties that arise from this relationship and an exploration of the psychological impact of the pressures put on *Baalat Teshuva* as they accept the ‘radical reconceptualization of femininity’ demanded by Ultra-Orthodoxy.<sup>357</sup> This is not King-Feuerman’s area of interest, however. Beth’s ‘loud and uninhibited’ sobs when alone in the Jerusalem forest are not indicative of an existential crisis but come from a frustration that is ‘proof [...] she had a wild, beautiful core’

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid, p.186.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid, pp. 34, 11.

<sup>356</sup> Kaufman, p.60.

<sup>357</sup> Davidman, p.48.

beneath her ‘prim and composed’ exterior.<sup>358</sup> This aligns her both with the tradition of heroines such as Jane Eyre, who are outwardly controlled but have an intense inner life, and within a Jewish model of femininity through her awareness as an Ultra-Orthodox woman of both spiritual and physical desire.

Thus, the meetings of Beth and Akiva are full of a comic energy and romantic promise despite their initial awkwardness, configuring them as potential lovers who, like Shakespeare’s Beatrice and Benedick, are mature and well-matched but wilful, stubborn and also vulnerable. Because *Seven Blessings* is a romantic comedy of manners, its misconceptions and misunderstandings are not destructive but rather build the lovers’ capacity to learn more about themselves in the course of the narrative that covers their introduction, separation and reconciliation. Their meetings alternate between success and failure, familiarity and alienation which Judith Lewin describes as a ‘struggle to reconcile beliefs with desires.’<sup>359</sup> This suggests that the relationship between the spiritual and physical world is a site of conflict whereas King-Feuerman offers a sense of the heightening of religious belief through physical desire. Added to this is Beth’s desire as a Jewish woman to find a partner to whom she can ‘connect and commit’<sup>360</sup> as a way of fulfilling what Kabbalah describes as the human soul’s deepest ambition. In her rendering of the marriage plot, King-Feuerman has taken the statement from Genesis 2:18, ‘It is not good for man to be alone’ and explored it in relation to her heroine’s private longing and public experiences.

As a story of Modern-Orthodox courtship, *Seven Blessings* uses the concept of *shomer negiah* – guarding one’s touch - to complement the romantic comedy of manners’

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<sup>358</sup> King-Feuerman, p.43.

<sup>359</sup> Lewin, p.3.

<sup>360</sup> ‘Why Marry?’ [www.chabad.org/...>Lifecycle](http://www.chabad.org/...>Lifecycle) (accessed January 2017).

convention of a sexual tension expressed through intense verbal exchanges, where mutual attraction is often expressed in a combative way. King-Feuerman signposts early on during the first meeting of Beth and Akiva that there is an attraction; the normally circumspect Beth experiences ‘the violence of hope’ finding herself ‘soothed and stimulated at the same time.’<sup>361</sup> The reader is encouraged to see this as a ‘marriage of true minds’ but knows that as this is so early in the narrative, something must happen to present an obstacle in their path.<sup>362</sup> This lies in Akiva’s Asperclonus Type Syndrome, ‘a tortured hiccup [...] as if he were being shaken violently’ and Beth’s reaction to it.<sup>363</sup> At first this does not exert a negative effect on her and the narrative draws attention to Beth’s sense ‘of wonder’ at Akiva’s handsomeness as they walk home and her desire to initiate ‘some physical gesture between them.’<sup>364</sup> This impulse is, however, immediately repressed as Beth remembers her conditioning as an observant woman who accepts that ‘the laws of Torah were unequivocal [...] wise, protective laws.’<sup>365</sup> This sexual tension is further developed during their second meeting, which moves them from the Ultra-Orthodox first-date location of Yemin Moshe – also used by Dina and her first love Abraham in *Sotah* - to ‘the seclusion of the Jerusalem Forest’ a place for which they both, individually, have an affinity and which comes to represent greater privacy and freedom of expression for them together.<sup>366</sup>

*Seven Blessings* works within a well-established literary tradition, familiar from Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen, where there is a constraint within the narrative itself, not just the behaviour of the characters being described. As Akiva and Beth become

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<sup>361</sup> King-Feuerman, pp. 40, 41.

<sup>362</sup> Shakespeare, Sonnet 116.

<sup>363</sup> King-Feuerman, p.45.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid*, p.48.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid*, p.48.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid*, p.86.

closer through intense conversation, so their physical awareness of each other becomes more urgent, established by King-Feuerman's sparing use of detail which signifies a developing intimacy, 'His voice was close to her' and 'They looked at each other and in the same instant their eyes dropped.'<sup>367</sup> This creates a scene of seduction played out within the protocols of Ultra-Orthodox modesty which, while comic through the limitations this imposes, is simultaneously serious in the resulting sexual tension. The demand for physical distance increases the awareness of physical proximity, so that when Akiva picks up one of Beth's shoes from the grass and 'his fingers slowly went along the sides, stroking the heel' this gesture becomes a foreplay that has such an acute effect on Beth that 'her own desire nauseated her.'<sup>368</sup> Beneath the controlled surface of this Ultra-Orthodox romantic encounter, King-Feuerman implies, through Beth's complex reactions to Akiva, that it is not so much the threat posed by his Asperclonus Type Syndrome that is the obstacle to their relationship, but a 39 year old *Baalat Teshuva* virgin's fear of sexual intimacy and emotional commitment.

The issue of Akiva's Syndrome does feature prominently in the first section of the novel, however. At the end of their first meeting it is outlined in dramatic detail: the movements, the sounds, the twisting of the head and the way his 'arms and shoulders quivered.'<sup>369</sup> Beth has immediate misgivings which focus on practicalities such as whether he could 'drive a car [...] hold a baby' but there is also the issue of a community reaction, 'How would he act in Shul?'<sup>370</sup> King-Feuerman develops this further during the scene of his second attack when Beth is embarrassed by the public nature of the spectacle and the, 'wondering stare' that she is given by her neighbour.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid, pp. 89, 90.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid, p.89.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid, p.45.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid, p.46 – *Shul* meaning synagogue.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid, p.94.

Almost immediately Akiva is rejected in a way that the reader identifies as short-sighted and Beth herself recognises as an error that she cannot now rectify. At the end of the novel's first section, King-Feuerman is signposting the lack of self-knowledge in her heroine and thus providing her with the challenge that will preoccupy the rest of the narrative: Beth's search to regain both her religious faith and her relationship with Akiva.

The middle section of *Seven Blessings* focuses on Beth's aloneness and provides two set-piece scenes where she is forced to confront her feelings about both religion and love. The first is a meeting with the Hasidic Rabbi Yellin to whom Beth makes an emotional appeal, 'Please give me a blessing I should succeed in finding [...] my besherte.'<sup>372</sup> Through his enigmatic response 'Maybe you already met him,' King-Feuerman is offering a moment of kabbalist insight,<sup>373</sup> a certainty that, in both the Jewish and the romance tradition, Beth and Akiva are meant to be together. The second scene of revelation takes place at the holiest site in Judaism, the Kotel or Western Wall. Here the narrative adopts the discourse of Modern-Orthodoxy's commitment to the existence of Israel to underline Beth's spiritual epiphany, comparing her personal loneliness to the land itself which had, 'come to life under the right hands.'<sup>374</sup> Similarly, there is hope for Beth to be saved through Akiva's love while, simultaneously, she begins to feel that her absence from worship is now 'incomprehensible to her.'<sup>375</sup> It is this renewed spiritual connection that energises Beth so that when she finds Akiva at the Broken Souls' Institute she experiences a 'little pulse of faith' that encourages her to continue without 'knowing what was in store.'<sup>376</sup> This sense of hope and liberation in

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<sup>372</sup> *Ibid*, p.146.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid*, p.146.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid*, p.195.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid*, p.194.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid*, p.198.



Beth, prepares the reader for a reconciliation and wedding in the model of an Austen novel, a Shakespearean comedy or a Jewish comedy of manners.

The lovers' reconciliation takes place during a party for Purim, a festival that celebrates Jewish salvation from the threat of annihilation through a joyous abandonment more associated with Italian carnival. King-Feuerman employs a number of features in this episode that carry symbolic importance: a storm that brings with it emotional release, characters who are disguised and free from the constraints normally imposed on them and a location, the Broken Souls' Institute and the Jerusalem Forest, that suggests the spiritual healing of the former is achieved through the liberation offered by the latter. To this are added the comic details of the lovers' disguises - Beth wears a beautified gorilla mask and a flowing caftan while Akiva is an overweight Mexican in a sombrero. These costumes are opaque enough to allow their wearers the opportunity to express themselves without fear of exposure, but also suggest that, to the one who loves, a disguise cannot conceal the authentic self of the beloved. The anticipated revelation comes during a moment of lyrical natural description and comic human behaviour. As a 'shadow flickered' and 'the trees made a sighing sound,' Beth asks rhetorically 'Who are you?' and Akiva replies with heavy meaning 'I know who *you* are,' all the while frantically pulling out the layers of his over-weight disguise.<sup>377</sup> King-Feuerman maintains the Modern-Orthodox nature of this comedy of manners scene and at the long-anticipated moment of revelation there is no embrace; *Shomer negiah* dictates that although Beth's hands ached to touch him, 'the desire in them both must be sublimated through a touching of the discarded masks before these are returned to the wearer.'<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> *Ibid*, p.221.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid*, p.223.

The final chapters of *Seven Blessings* focus on the preparations for and the wedding itself and return to the foregrounding of women's collective experience. The detail of Beth 'stocking up on her head-coverings' signifies not only the fulfilment of her desire to be a part of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish domestic life as a married woman but, more significantly, her movement from a position of doubt to the belief that 'she was not immune to love.'<sup>379</sup> She can now accept without fear that her 'private desire' can be 'made public.'<sup>380</sup> In the spirit of Shakespearean romantic comedy, the wedding ceremony takes place with the lovers surrounded by their ensemble of friends, but King-Feuerman adds to this two distinctively Jewish elements. Firstly, Beth's articulation that Akiva is 'the one God had planned for her from eternity' and secondly the setting of the ceremony in the ancient Jerusalem forest that has played such an important role in bringing the lovers together both spiritually and romantically.<sup>381</sup> The final scene fuses the elements that have most concerned King-Feuerman in her narrative: the finding of the 'besherte,' within the 'large extended family' of Modern-Orthodoxy and the mutually-supportive network of religious women that operates as a central part of this.<sup>382</sup> Beth is brought to the *chuppah*<sup>383</sup> where Akiva awaits her not by her mother, as tradition dictates, but by the group of women characters who have helped her throughout her story. 'Flanked [...] on all three sides' by the ever-present forest and surrounded by a community of female friends who are 'as one,'<sup>384</sup> King-Feuerman's heroine moves from her state as a single woman towards Akiva and Jewish marriage.

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid, pp. 234, 236.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid, p.235.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid, p.236.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid, p.256.

<sup>383</sup> *Chuppah* = the marriage canopy under which the couple and their family stand.

<sup>384</sup> King-Feuerman, pp. 252, 258.

## Conclusion

‘.. to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out – ‘This is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be.’<sup>385</sup>

‘There are links between women writers because they are women.’<sup>386</sup>

This study has taken as its focus Abraham’s *The Romance Reader*, Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls*, Ragen’s *Sotah* and King-Feuerman’s *Seven Blessings* as a means of investigating representations of Ultra-Orthodox heroines in late twentieth century popular Jewish-American women’s writing. It has given particular consideration both to the specifically Jewish elements in the writers’ configurations of their protagonists, and the range of literary heroines and genres from which they are drawn. I have argued that in addition to their use of these character and genre types, all four novelists create heroines who inhabit a specifically Ultra-Orthodox territory, a social reality defined by Jewish ritual and community values, and shaped by Orthodoxy’s attentiveness to ‘the hegemonic voice.’<sup>387</sup> The normative and subversive traits within the construction of the four heroines operate within a sphere dominated by the demands of Jewish law and this facilitates the writers’ use of characteristics which can be read as particular models of Jewish femininity: *Binah*, *Aishes Chayil*, *Sotah* and *Baalat Teshuva*. These archetypes range from conformity to rebellion, foregrounding a wide variety of female experience within the spectrum of observant Judaism because although all four heroines adhere to

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<sup>385</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 694.

<sup>386</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: Great Writers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p80.

<sup>387</sup> Tamar El Or, ‘Visibilities and Possibilities: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women between the domestic and public spheres’ in *Women’s Studies International Forum* 20:5/6 (1997), 665-673 (p.672).

an ancient tradition, 'It cannot be assumed that Orthodox women share the same [...] self-understanding,'<sup>388</sup> within it.

This study has argued that all four writers create heroines who, despite their differences, are distinctively Jewish through their experience of and responses to the cultural and religious practices placed at the centre of the novels. It is through this core Jewish narrative that a coherent picture of what it is to be an Ultra-Orthodox heroine emerges through the explicitly Ultra-Orthodox discourses. This coherence is achieved through a number of methodological features that have been highlighted in the previous four chapters. Firstly, there is an insistence within all four texts of the centrality of religious social-conditioning in observant communities, and the effect this has on the heroines through a layering of details connected to social, domestic and sacred practices. In addition to this, the writers create their texts' central conflicts through a focus on the relationship between the normative and subversive elements in their characters, and the resultant sense of duality experienced by the heroines. Finally, all four writers foreground and privilege Ultra-Orthodox women's experience by placing their heroines in environments shaped and dominated by androcentric concerns but where the primary narrative interest lies in a vivid and dynamic representation of female Jewish identity for a general, often non-Jewish female readership.

This study has demonstrated that the strong focus on religious social-conditioning in all four texts is achieved through myriad details of ritual and domestic conduct which, in an Ultra-Orthodox women's experience, are inextricably linked. In addition to this is the presentation of the complexities of language and identity and the public performing of a

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<sup>388</sup> Jody Myers, 'The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Hiddenness, Power and Physicality in the Theology of Orthodox Women in the Contemporary World,' in *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*, ed. by TM Rudavsky (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 51-77 (p.57).

‘discourse of modesty’<sup>389</sup> that dictates everything women should be. Within this context, all four writers draw on an understanding gained through their lived experience of observant Judaism in order to create their imaginative worlds. The construction of Ultra-Orthodox women’s perception of reality as ‘primitive’ at worst and ‘passive’ at best,<sup>390</sup> as often presented in the mainstream media, is replaced by a more nuanced picture in all four novels. This study has argued that it is here, as well as in their understanding and use of literary genre which help to configure their protagonists, a coherent model of an Ultra-Orthodox heroine lies. All four writers create a sense of the communal worlds inhabited by their individual characters, one which is shaped by a belief that the Ultra-Orthodox are ‘connected to others [...] in the present, by blood or language [...] through time by a shared belonging to something from (the) past.’<sup>391</sup> In these communities the private becomes public and the domestic reflects the ideological so that, although the writers are interested primarily in the private and domestic spheres, they create also a detailed picture of the wider religious society within which their heroines operate.

Throughout this study I have sought to demonstrate that, while religious and cultural social-conditioning plays a central role in the four novels, it is used in different ways. The strong distinctions between what is considered normative and subversive within Ultra-Orthodox society puts the opposition between the external reality of the community and the heroine’s inner ‘self’ at the centre of the narratives. Thus, all four writers use the trope of the individual’s struggle against the authority of her wider society in ways that are appropriate to their heroines’ distinctive positions, as well as the

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<sup>389</sup> Al Or, p.665.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid, p.671.

<sup>391</sup> TJ Clark, ‘Review of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*’, *London Review of Books* 28.18 (21 September 2006), 6-8 (p.6).

genre frameworks which support the texts. I have further argued that a unified picture of the heroines emerges also through the writers' emphasis on the trope of duality, through the presentation of the conflict within the 'self' and the heroines' search for individual identity. Threaded through each text, is the character's navigation of her particularised position within Ultra-Orthodoxy.

A vital element in this configuration of role is what Yael Shenker defines as 'identity swapping.'<sup>392</sup> Shenker's area of expertise lies in a critique of actual Ultra-Orthodox women's writing, but her conclusion has resonance for the four heroines in the novels considered in this study. Shenker argues that in Ultra-Orthodox women's writing about Ultra-Orthodox women

Even if characters ultimately choose a religious identity [...] the very examination of the alternatives opened up [...] is as significant as the actual choice.'<sup>393</sup>

All four heroines experience a significant period of indecision about their religious identities and although Abraham's Rachel chooses a path beyond religious observance, Elizabeth, Dina and Beth adopt the 'refreshed and more varied Haredi identity' that Shenker recognises in the texts that she has studied.<sup>394</sup> Eventually Goodman's Elizabeth accepts and modifies her position, Ragen's Dina redefines her role through contact with the outside world while King-Feuerman's Beth embraces the fusion of the spiritual and the material offered by Modern-Orthodoxy. All are different, but the point of coherence for the writers is the process undergone by their heroines, recognised by Shenker in her

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<sup>392</sup> Yael Shenker, *Choosing One's Life: Identity Swapping Plots in Popular Fiction by Israeli Haredi Writers* *Israel Studies* 22.1 (Spring 2017), 189-212 (Abstract for the article <https://muse.jhu.edu>>...> accessed March 2017).

<sup>393</sup> Shenker

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid*

work and outlined in the individual chapters offered here. The narrative journeys of the four novels do not reject or vilify Ultra-Orthodoxy, even when the narrative voice is critical or the novel's denouement facilitates a character's moving away from the community. Instead, they seek to present a picture that is loyal to the precepts of religious observance without being partisan. All four writers suggest that the cultural and religious imprinting within Ultra-Orthodox families and communities is not always easy for women. Through the production of narratives that engage with the, 'ambiguities, tensions and conflicts inherent in everyday experiences,'<sup>395</sup> and found in all societies, the writers offer heroines who have emotional and psychological attachments to their Ultra-Orthodox contexts that are lasting and profound despite the difficulties they experience and the compromises they make.

This investigation has recognised the increased interest in Ultra-Orthodox women's experience from 1990s onwards, both anthropologically and in fiction. Prior to this, the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy was the domain of writers such as Chaim Grade, IB Singer and Chaim Potok, whose novel *The Chosen* (1966) examines the friendship between an assimilated Jewish boy and one from a Hasidic background. While the latter's father is a central character in the narrative, his mother and sister are reduced to a few references to do with physical appearance, 'His mother was short, with blue eyes and a roundish body. Her head was covered with a kerchief.'<sup>396</sup> The novels under consideration here, together with others by writers such as Tovah Mirvis and Rebecca Goldstein and more recently Eve Harris and Anouk Markovits,<sup>397</sup> serve to remedy the androcentric nature of

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<sup>395</sup> Kaufman, p62.

<sup>396</sup> Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (London: Penguin, 1970), p.161

<sup>397</sup> Tova Mirvis, *The Outside World* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2004).

Rebecca Goldstein, *Mazel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

Eve Harris, *The Marrying of Chani Kaufman* (Scotland: Sandstone Press Ltd, 2013).

Anouk Markovits, *I am Forbidden* (London: Vintage, 2012).

writing about observant Jews by privileging Ultra-Orthodox women's experience in a dynamic foreground rather than a supportive background. Judith Plaskow argues that at the central moment in Jewish history when Moses receives the Torah at Sinai 'women are invisible.'<sup>398</sup> I have argued that, through their creation of imaginative Ultra-Orthodox landscapes, Jewish-American women's writing from 1990s onwards has sought to rectify this historically-determined position.

Ellen Moers' recognition of the distinctive relationship which exists between women writers because they are women has an even greater resonance for Jewish women writers, who are connected by both gender considerations and those within Judaic culture and practice. Sylvia Barack Fishman's argument that 'literature shapes and reflects popular conceptions of the nature and capacities of women,'<sup>399</sup> further develops Moers' point in relation to the four women writers under consideration here who are aware of their responsibilities as mediators of Ultra-Orthodox women's experiences to their audiences. Despite having left the Hasidic community of her upbringing, Abraham considers her writing about that community to be rooted in 'a belief in an inner knowledge,' while King-Feberman asserts that 'If you don't create literature about your own world, you're not serious about preserving that world.'<sup>400</sup>

Alan Berger acknowledges the late-twentieth century fictive interest in Orthodoxy arguing that 'literary preoccupation with Orthodoxy is a long-standing feature of American-Jewish novelists.'<sup>401</sup> He designates writing about Ultra-Orthodox women by

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<sup>398</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), p1.

<sup>399</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Follow my Footprints Changing Images of Women in American Jewish Fiction* (New England: Brandeis University Press, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>400</sup> Rubin, p.237; King-Feberman Blog-page 06/06/2014.

<sup>401</sup> Alan Berger, 'American Jewish Fiction', *Modern Jewish Studies* 10.3 Part 1 (October 1990), 221-241 (p.222).



Jewish-American women writers as a 'neo-Orthodoxy' which 'takes into account the impact of feminism on Judaism.'<sup>402</sup> This observation is relevant to this study because it directs attention to the purpose behind the novels considered here. Abraham, Goodman, Ragen and King-Feurman draw not only on recognisable literary genre and tropes to address some of the central issues that dominate women's writing generally, they seek to transmit their heroines' experiences not just through an imaginative rendering of the traditional separate spheres and 'discrete realms of control'<sup>403</sup> of Ultra-Orthodox domestic space but also 'issues of Jewish practice, texts, rituals and spirituality' and the impact of secular issues and modernity on women in observant communities.<sup>404</sup>

The four novelists move beyond the externals of Anne Mozley's description of the best female writers' ability to 'turn their gifts to social and domestic account'<sup>405</sup> although they do cover this successfully, and focus more on what George Eliot recognises as the unique quality of women writers, the ability to evoke 'a class of sensations and emotions which must remain unknown to man.'<sup>406</sup> This has a particular significance for the fictive representation of Ultra-Orthodox women who occupy a world that is physically and emotionally demarcated along gender lines. Abraham, Goodman, Ragen and King-Feurman provide similar examples of the separation of men and women in the synagogue, in domestic roles where the woman is the agent of faith and family, and in social activities and rituals. The designated women's mitzvot of *nerot*, *challah* and *niddah* are there as part of the rhythm of the characters' lives in the novels,<sup>407</sup> with

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<sup>402</sup> Berger, p.223

<sup>403</sup> Frederick E Greenspahn, 'Women and Judaism: From Invisibility to Integration', in *New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. by Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: nyu Press, 2009), pp.245-253 (p.251).

<sup>404</sup> Sara Horowitz, 'New Wave of Jewish-American Women's Writing', in *New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. by Frederick E Greenspahn (New York: nyu Press, 2009), pp. 199-222 (p.207).

<sup>405</sup> Shirley Foster, *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual* (London: Croom Held, 1985), p.3

<sup>406</sup> Foster, p.3

<sup>407</sup> *Nerot* = Candle-lighting; *Challah* = baking of bread and *niddah* = family purity.

*niddah* in particular creating a micro-world that is ‘unknown to man’ but aligned with a feminist sensibility and connected to Jewish history and the private space of women.

This dissertation is predicated on the question of what makes an Ultra-Orthodox heroine and I have argued that it is the writers’ use of their characters’ understanding and observance of the Laws as ‘not history, not legend, not myth’ but ‘alive and binding’<sup>408</sup> that makes these heroines collectively Ultra-Orthodox in their configuration, representative of a variety of feminine models within the richness and complexity of an ancient tradition. Rachel S Harris argues that whereas writers such as Anzia Yeziarska, Mary Antin and Esther Kreitman tended to present Jewish traditions as ‘oppressive and excluding women,’ the generation of Abraham, Goodman, Ragen and King-Feurman offer a world which, whilst imperfect and defined by gender division, is characterised by the ‘beauty in time-honoured customs and rituals.’<sup>409</sup> In addition, despite their stylistic and genre differences, their novels also reflect the full-range of heroines recognisable from the mainstream tradition. They are teenage and mature; they conform and rebel; in their strength, anxiety, selfishness and ‘complex self-consciousness’<sup>410</sup> they reflect the ‘otherness’ of Ultra-Orthodoxy as a part of the commonalities of women characters across texts written by women for women readers.

Ultra-Orthodox society desires women to be invisible in wider society: to dress in an under-stated, uniform way; to avoid attention in public spaces; to keep to their designated areas in prayer, ritual and family. To the non-observant world they are arcane curiosities as a group but not individually defined, and in novels specifically

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<sup>408</sup> Tova Mirvis, ‘Writing between Worlds’, in *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America*, ed. by Evelyn Avery (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.241-247 (p.246).

<sup>409</sup> Harris, p.88.

<sup>410</sup> Brownstein, p.296.

about the Ultra-Orthodox they have been neglected for some considerable time by male writers whose fictive worlds reflect the values of the society they are representing. In *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf identifies the invisible women of literature as ‘women of forty [...] unmarried women,’ such as Beth Wilmer, ‘working women [...] women who keep shops and bring up children,’ like Elizabeth Shulman, Dina Reich and Tsippi Krauthammer. They are the characters that ‘one knows nothing whatever about.’<sup>411</sup> I have argued throughout this study that *The Romance Reader*, *Kaaterskill Falls*, *Sotah* and *Seven Blessings* seek to rectify such notions of ‘invisibility’ and ‘otherness’ through the creation of four female protagonists whose uniqueness and importance is validated both by their status as engaging fictive heroines but also through the Ultra-Orthodox elements at the heart of their narratives which determine their core Jewish identity. All four writers offer their characters’ complex attachments to Ultra-Orthodoxy through the dramatization of the heroines’ sense of self, familial ties and their strong sense of allegiance to a religious practice rooted in the past but strong in the present. In their ‘intimate rendering of this otherwise hidden world’ of observant Judaism, the novelists are able to ‘liberate the women within it’<sup>412</sup> and provide a distinctive and coherent representation of what it is to be an Ultra-Orthodox heroine.

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<sup>411</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.226.

<sup>412</sup> Harris, p88.

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