

MIDRASH IN THE NOVEL *THE RED TENT* BY ANITA DIAMANT

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ABSTRACT

The novel *The Red Tent*, 1997, by Anita Diamant, an American writer with a Jewish origin, explores and presents the life of Dinah in the Bible from a woman's perspective. In the *Bible*, Dinah is totally silenced and Diamant in her novel presents her with a voice, in order her story to be heard. *The Red Tent* presents the rich experience of women and their lives, which when revealed and shown, present and establish the meaning of women in biblical times and encourage within it, recognition and confirmation of the women's experience and importance. The novel *The Red Tent* is part of the Midrash phenomenon, which is part of the women's re-writing and it is a method for interpretation of biblical narratives, which promotes creative writing. Midrash is commonly defined as the process of interpretation by which "gaps" found in the *Torah* are filled in. The Midrash is divided into two categories: traditional and modern. The traditional is divided in two categories: Halakhan and Aggadah and *The Red Tent* belongs in the category of modern Midrash.

Keywords: Midrash, Women's re-writing, Halakhan, Aggadah

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's re-writing as a genre, emerged in the late 1960s, a period in which both Feminist and Post-Colonial writers started to employ re-writing as a tool to challenge the authority of canonical texts. Feminist and Post-Colonial writers provide a voice for the previously marginalized characters and provide them with a new space within the old stories and present their stories from a different perspective. Since the 1960's, the genre received considerable attention from both writers and academics, as it investigates and deconstructs the past from the contemporary perspective, thus making connections to the present. Liedeke Plate explains:

Women's re-writing is defined as a genre in which narratives of the past are retold from the perspective of a new, marginal and usually female character in the original story, whose voice the readers often have a chance to hear for the first time. (2011:9)

Plate in her book *Transforming Memory in the Contemporary Women's Re-writing* claims that: Re-writing is a change which transforms the narratives that formed the cultural identity and the cultural memory, that enables women writers to create a space for expression of the female experience in the literary tradition, which is legitimately their own tradition. Women writers through re-writing show their own creativity, but they also use re-writing as a strategy, intervention and a means for a change of the status of women in society (Plate, L. 2011:40).

Plate explains that one of the first theoreticians regarding re-writing is the American poet, literary critic, and feminist activist Adrienne Rich, whose concept of Re-vision would energize women writers – initially, especially poets – to respond to tradition with texts of their own (Plate, L. 2011:5).

Adrienne Rich states that "literature does not reflect women's lives and experiences, it offers no guides, maps, possibilities for the young woman" (Plate 2011:6), who is as a result not able to find *herself* in the

fiction she encounters. Creating new stories out of old ones does not entail solely the act of reconstructive writing, but also the process of deconstructive reading, which is the starting point for all re-writings.

Women's re-writing transforms the narratives that have created the cultural identity and the cultural memory, through which the women can form their own cultural literary tradition which influences the culture. Midrash is part of the women's re-writing and it is a method of interpretation of biblical narratives which fulfills the gaps in the biblical narrative regarding events and personalities that are only hinted at. Midrash by definition is a search for unexplained things in the *Bible* or for some omissions, of which women writers can create their own versions of the stories. Anita Diamant's famous novel *The Red Tent* is part of the modern Midrash and it is a powerful novel that presents the importance of the role of women in biblical times.

2. THE NOVEL *THE RED TENT* BY ANITA DIAMANT - PART OF THE MIDRASH PHENOMENON

The novel *The Red Tent*, 1997, by Anita Diamant, an American writer with a Jewish origin, explores and presents the life of Dinah in the *Bible* from a woman's perspective. This novel became a *New York Times* best-seller and Booksense Book of the Year 2001. It is a first-person narrative that tells the story of Dinah, daughter of Jacob and sister of Joseph. She is a minor character in the *Bible*, but the author in this novel has broadened her story, thus creating a whole new light on the life of Dinah. In the *Bible*, Dinah is totally silenced and Diamant in her novel presents her with a voice, in order her story to be heard and passed on to the new generations of women.

The Red Tent presents the rich experiences of women and their lives, which when revealed and shown, present and establish the meaning of women in the biblical history and encourage within it, recognition and confirmation of the women's experience and importance. The novel *The Red Tent* is part of the Midrash phenomenon, which is part of the women's re-writing and it is a method for interpretation of biblical narratives, which promotes creative writing. Midrash is commonly defined as the process of interpretation by which "gaps" found in the *Torah* are filled in.

Midrash means a search for unexplained things in the *Bible* or for some omissions, for which the women writers can create their own versions of the stories. There are two types of Midrash: Traditional and Modern. The Traditional Rabbinic Midrash refers to the *Written and Oral Torah*, referring to the 22nd books of the *Hebrew Bible* from the 1st to the 11th century, called Genesis Rabah and it focuses on specific words, sudden twists in the narrative or some contradictions, for which a new interpretation is being opened. The Modern Midrash refers to the re-writings written by women writers who want to emphasize the importance of women in Biblical times.

The interpretation of biblical stories through elaboration, a process known as Midrash, is a traditional form of rabbinic commentary. The Jewish view of *Torah* is essential to an understanding of rabbinic Midrash. The *Written Torah* is the twenty-two books of the *Hebrew Bible*, but according to the rabbinic tradition, this written material is complemented by unwritten information, called the *Oral Torah*. The *Written Torah* is often elliptical or brief to the point of being difficult to understand. The *Oral Torah* fleshes out material that is missing, confusing or contradictory in the *Written Torah*. The ancient rabbis, experts in the study of *Torah*, used methods of exegesis to derive additional biblical content and compiled their commentaries into the *Oral Torah*.

The root word for Midrash literally means "search" or "investigation". Midrash falls into two categories. When the subject is law and religious practice - Halacha, it is called Midrash Halachan. Midrash Aggadah – Aggadah, the second category, means "story," interpretation of biblical narrative, exploring questions of ethics or theology or creating parables based on the text in the *Bible*. Aggadic Midrash generally fills in

perceived gaps in the Written Torah, whereas Halakhic Midrash explains rules that the Jewish people should follow. Modern feminist Midrash is modeled on the Aggadic Midrash.

The Red Tent is part of the modern Midrash. According to Anita Diamant: It's a historic novel "placed" in the 1500 B.C. with a content which derives from the Bible, narrated from the point of view of one woman (Dinah) and her culture. In the Bible, in the story of Dinah, Jacob's daughter there is violence, drama and a massacre. Dinah's silence is a great start (Cabot, V.2000:34).

By presenting Dinah with a voice, Diamant through her novel is an active factor in the process of reconstruction of the past and by ending Dinah's silence, the writer steps out of the patriarchal and the traditional and creates a powerful novel that exalts women and their experiences.

Re-writing is a feministic tool for substantial intervention in the canon and for demystification of its universal principles. According to Alisia Ostriker, "Diamant gets into the center to reach for the tents/texts to find new, hidden meaning in them" (Ostriker, A.1994:7).

The novel, *The Red Tent* retells biblical events from a female perspective and emphasizes women's experiences. It is an excellent example of Midrash and it falls in the category of Midrash that Ellen M. Umansky is urging Jewish women to create in her essay, *Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, Possibilities and Problems* (Umansky, E.1989:187). She encourages and urging Jewish women to create Midrash, that is, to imagine, alternate and write supplementary versions of Jewish myths from the perspective of the women in biblical stories.

There are two types of Feminist writers who create Midrash. The first group chooses to abandon the *Torah* as too patriarchal, while the other group of women continues to accept the entire Jewish tradition and texts, and they construct apologetics that reconcile apparent conflicts between the text and a feminist perspective. Umansky states that the creating of modern feminist Midrash, reconciles women's modern experiences and Jewish tradition in a legitimately Jewish process. Umansky defends her view that Jewish women, by creating Midrash, bridge the gap between experience and tradition and that Midrash is as a useful tool for meeting Jewish feminist needs.

Umansky claims that the goal of the Jewish feminist theologian is to harmonize personal experience and tradition for the modern Jewish woman. Umansky suggests that one way to do this is to radically re-imagine Jewish texts from a female perspective. This re-imagining of the texts is necessary, because the existing Jewish literature was written almost exclusively for and by men. Umansky points out that the feminist theologian must acknowledge that she must find the feminine voice in Jewish history and express that voice. In that context Eryl Davies points out that:

This representation of women as unimportant and marginalized should be substituted with the presentation of women in the central position i.e. in the role of protagonists – central characters in those same stories and circumstances where they were previously marginalized. (2003:87)

According to Alisia Ostriker, the histories of men are on the surface of the text and the histories of women are beneath the surface. They are hidden histories, forgotten ones (Ostriker, A.1989: 541). The Feminists are continually searching and reinterpreting the upper-level in the Bible, in order to find and reassess these hidden stories for the lives of women, which when revealed establish the meaning of women in Biblical context and by that they acknowledge and confirm the importance of women and their contributions.

Anne Cranny-Francis explains that: There are four strategies that women writers use in the Feminist Critics in order to redefine, change and revise the literary norms that used to strengthen the inferior status of women. These strategies which change the inferior status of women are firstly, making women protagonists,

narrators, secondly, putting them in the same circumstances in which they were marginalized, but with the important difference that now they manage their own destiny, as the third strategy and the fourth category is the deconstruction of the dominant ideologies (Cranny-Francis, A. 1990:116).

Umansky states that: All of the sources of Jewish theology: the Written and Oral Torah, philosophical and mystical texts, and traditional liturgy were largely (if not exclusively) created by and for men. Thus, the first task of the Jewish feminist theologian is to recognize that the visions we have received are incomplete. Before the feminist theologian can reform or transmit Judaism's traditional visions, she needs to receive these visions herself. She needs to hear her own voice and feel her own presence within the sources of Jewish tradition. Before the feminist theologian can shape the context of religious expression, she must discover what women's religious experience has been. To do this may require reading between the lines, filling in stories, writing new ones and making guesses.

The novel *The Red Tent* is classified as a modern Midrash. There are three criteria so that one text can be classified as a modern Midrash, according to Hellen Umansky who states:

There are three criteria by which one text can be considered a modern Midrash. Firstly, it should be written from a woman's point of view, secondly it must derive as an answer to a biblical text and thirdly, in the text there must be a harmony between the tradition and the personal experience. (1989:188)

The novel *The Red Tent* has all the characteristics of a text which belongs to the category of Modern Midrash. It is written from Dinah's point of view; it is based on events in the *Bible* connected to the life of Dinah from *Genesis 29:1-50:26* and sets harmony between the tradition and the personal experience. This fictional novel is based on characters in *Genesis 29:1-50:26*. The story follows the lives of Jacob, his wives and his children. In *The Red Tent*, Jacob had four wives, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah. Leah bore him seven sons, Reuben, Simon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Naphtali and Issachar. Leah also bore him a daughter, Dinah. Rachael bore Joseph and Benjamin. Zilpah bore Gad and Asher. Bilhah bore Dan. Jacob had twelve sons in all, but only one daughter, Dinah. Dinah narrates the story in *The Red Tent*, whereas in the *Bible* she never utters a word. Diamant weaves a narrative around events recorded in *Genesis* and describes how events affected her and the other women in her family. In the *Bible* the narration focuses on the lives of men and in the novel the narration is on the lives of women. Because of Diamant's careful and thorough research and the way she writes, it is difficult for the reader to distinguish historical accuracy from poetic license.

Umansky does not apply her ideas of feminist Midrash explicitly to *The Red Tent*; nevertheless, her criteria for creating feminist Midrash are definitely represented in *The Red Tent*. Dinah is the first-person narrator of *The Red Tent* and so the story unfolds from the perspective of a woman in the *Bible*. This fulfills Umansky's first criterion of a modern woman (Diamant) retelling a biblical story from a female character's perspective (Dinah). For example, Diamant's Dinah narrates in the prologue:

There was far more to tell. Had I been asked to speak of it, I would have begun with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin. If you want to understand any woman you must first ask about her mother and then listen carefully. (1997:1)

By giving the silenced Dinah a voice, Umansky's second criterion for feminist Midrash is met and that is that the new story originates as a response to the biblical text. Diamant uses Dinah's voice to communicate with modern female readers in a way that fulfills Umansky's third criterion for modern feminist Midrash and the process of creating Midrash must work towards reconciling the ancient voices and the modern voices of Jewish women. Dinah is clearly passing her story on to the modern generation and Diamant

signifies the passing of the story to the next generation by dedicating the book to her daughter: 'FOR EMILIA, MY DAUGHTER.'

The first words of *The Red Tent* are Dinah's and directly address modern women. Diamant begins the prologue with a soliloquy by Dinah:

We have been lost to each other for so long. My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust. This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. (1997:1)

Diamant explains that: The compressed stories and images in the Bible are rather like photographs. They don't tell us everything we want or need to know. Midrash is the story about what happened before and after the photographic flash.

3. CONCLUSION

Diamant takes the story from the Bible as a starting point and writes a life for Dinah. The novel consists of three parts, part one - My Mothers' Stories is about Dinah's Family History: From the arrival of Jacob in Haran to the birth of Joseph (Midrash on Genesis 29:1 - 30:24), part two is My Story, Dinah's life: From the childhood of Dinah to the massacre of Shechem (Midrash on Genesis 30:21 - 35:26) and part three: Egypt, Dinah's life in Egypt: From the aftermath of the massacre to Dinah's reconciliation with the family of her childhood (Parallel to Joseph's Story: Genesis 37:1 - 49:27). In the final chapters of *The Red Tent*, Diamant takes Dinah out of her unknown state and completes her life in Egypt. Though the scriptures indicate that Dinah traveled to Egypt with her family, Diamant changes that aspect and has her escape instead with Shalem's mother, the Queen Re-Nafer.

In *The Red Tent*, Dinah becomes one of the Hebrew midwives referenced in Exodus and the word of her skill spreads quickly and she is soon considered the primary midwife in her community. Diamant is creating an important parallel between the lives of Dinah and Rachel, Dinah's aunt. Perhaps, Diamant is suggesting that Dinah's true stature should have been considered equal to that of Rachel. Over the course of the novel, Dinah grows from being a little, passive girl attached to her mothers, into a capable and independent woman, an active agent in her own life. Despite the fact that Dinah endures unspeakable grief and loss, she rebuilds herself and builds a new home together with Benia, her new husband, shares her love with her new friends and a new family that fulfill her desire for a productive and peaceful life.

Diamant creates a life for Dinah and thus she creates Midrash and by doing so she changes our perspective of the life of Dinah and of the role of women in biblical times. We – the readers do not see Dinah as she was presented before, she is no longer the marginalized, voiceless woman, she is now a brave, loved and loving daughter and wife, a successful midwife and a capable and strong woman, that we will remember and we will look up to. The importance of Midrash is that by presenting strong women characters and setting strong role models for women, modern women have role models to identify with and to learn from, to be proud of and to connect with. It establishes a whole new literary tradition for women where the women's experience, knowledge and strength is being praised, appreciated and passed on to the next generation of women.

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