



حوليات آداب عين شمس المجلد 47 (عدد أكتوبر – ديسمبر 2019)

<http://www.aafu.journals.ekb.eg>

(دورية علمية محكمة)



جامعة عين شمس

A Psychoanalytic Reading of Projection in the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Pearl Abraham's The Romance Reader

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Abstract:

Pearl Abraham's first novel The Romance Reader (1995) features the struggle between Hasidism and modernity as exemplified in the conflictual relationship between the main female character Rachel Benjamin and her mother Tovele. Rachel is born to a Hasidic Rabbi seeking the fulfillment of his Gnostic experience by secluding himself and his family away from the modern means of life in America. Thus, what others take for granted in everyday life is totally prohibited by the Hasidic Benjamin family. Rachel, the first born daughter of the rabbi, is prohibited from any liberal indulgence in modern life; such as, reading books in English; listening to the radio; or swimming in a swimsuit. According to the norm of the Hasidic community, Rachel's marriage is prearranged at a premature age. This paper offers a critical psychoanalytic reading of the relationship between Rachel and her mother, who is ironically the oppressor and the victim of the repressive Hasidic rules. Still, the novel recounts the constant conflict between Rachel's mother and her stubbornly disobedient daughter. Rachel begins her rebellion by illicitly obtaining a library card in order to read romance novels in English. Rachel goes against all odds and swims in a swimsuit. She also wears sheer stockings against the austere teachings of her religious sect. eventually, Rachel becomes an impossibly stubborn wife and the novel ends with her escape and divorce. Finally, when Rachel returns home, she is treated as a *persona non-grata*. Through the application of psychoanalytic reading of The Romance Reader, this study concludes that oppression in the Hasidic household is self-imposed by the father who projects it onto his wife, who by turn projects it onto her daughter. The projector/projected-onto relationship between the Hasidic mother and her resilient daughter assumes the pivotal interest of this psychoanalytic reading.

Born in America to an ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish family, Rachel Benjamin's passage through the tough years of adolescence is nothing but perilous. Rachel—the main character in Pearl Abraham's debut *The Romance Reader* (1995)—has to suffer twice due to the restrictions imposed on her because of her gender in a patriarchal community, and because of her domineeringly observant Hasidic parents. Even though, they live in free and modern America, Rachel and her siblings are born to parents whose austere religious belief rejects modernity. Being an observant Hassidic family, Rachel and her siblings are prevented from watching television or listening to the radio. Moreover, they are not allowed to read English books or newspapers: a sinful blasphemy against the Talmudic tradition. A Hasidic girl, in particular, is not allowed to wear sheer stockings—as much as she is denied to wear a swimsuit or to swim in public—and she is prohibited to recite loud from the Torah because she is a female. As a future Jewish-mother, Rachel is supposed to help preserve the lineage of patriarchal Talmudic scholars by means of reproduction via her female body; nevertheless, this female body is the main source of remorse and troublesomeness for the Hasidic patriarchs.

Psychoanalysis maintains that projection as defense mechanism occurs as a subject attempts to reduce his dissonance towards his social periphery. Dissonance stems from the simultaneous existence of conflicting cognitions of one's self-esteem and undesired oppressive relations, attributes or behaviors. A subject suffering from the dissonant ego and super-ego tends to project his negative feelings of oppression, hatred, and subjugation onto others as a means of defense mechanism. This study deals with the main female Jewish character's psychological complaint growing up in a family that suffers from self-imposed oppression. Within the framework of a feminist psychoanalytic reading, this paper aims at investigating the Jewish mother-daughter relationship in an oppressively persecuting Hassidic faith such as the one presented in Pearl Abraham's semi-autobiographical *The Romance Reader*. Therefore, the mechanisms of projecting this self-imposed oppression onto members of the Hassidic family by the persecutive mother and the victimized daughter's defense mechanisms against it assume the pivotal interest of this psychoanalytic critical investigation. It is, in other words, an attempt at according the explanatory force of psychoanalysis to deciphering the signs and investigating the symptoms of the conflictual relation between the ultra-Orthodox Jewish mother and her daughter. This, however, comes in compliance with what Peter Brooks theorizes in *The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism* that crossing the boundaries between the territories of literature and psychoanalysis “both confirms and complicates our understanding of how our mind reformulate the real, how it

constructs the necessary fictions by which we dream, desire, interpret, indeed by which we constitute ourselves as human subjects” (348).

In his *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to the Present*, Gershon David Hundert quotes the famous Jewish Philosopher Solomon Maimon (1753-1800) observing the almost farcical exaggeration in regretting the birth of females among the religious scholars. Maimon says that as soon as the congregation of the pious scholars began to congratulate their colleague, in an “uproarious fashion,” for the birth of his daughter, their superior rabbi came out of his study to ask about the cause of their disturbing jubilation. When he was told the news, he rebuked them:

"A girl!" he answered with the greatest indignation, "he ought to be whipped." The poor fellow protested. He could not comprehend why he should be made to suffer for his wife having brought a girl into the world. But this was of no avail: he was seized, thrown down on the floor, and whipped unmercifully. All except the victim became hilarious over the affair, upon which the superior called them to prayer with the words, "Now, brethren, serve the Lord with gladness! (21)

The Jew's daughter is his dilemma. Her existence is essential as the means of reproducing a progeny of pious Talmudic male scholars; nevertheless, her female gender is shameful and dangerous to the pious. Therefore, rabbinical laws are mainly decreed to shun this shameful existence and to keep it undercover in order to curb the sensuous lust that may be incurred by it. The Law prohibits women's study of the Torah while men are obliged to excel in it. Women's participation in prayers and religious recitation is neither essential nor allowed as that of men. In fact, they are prohibited from participation by rabbinical rules that segregate between people because of their gender and ethnicity. So in The Romance Reader, the oldest daughter Rachel is not as privileged as her younger brothers who join in singing the psalms with their father; even though, she knows the words and the tunes by heart better than they do. By authority of religious laws, her father, Rabbi Benjamin, reminds her of the limitations of her gender, so she feels great remorse for being a female:

After prayers, Father comes in to see me. "Rachel. How do you feel? Are you tired?"

"No. I'm fine."

"I was having a hard time with that tune." He hums it and gets stuck again, the way he did during the service. I start him off again and sing it through past where he keeps getting stuck. He nods and hums. He's got it now. He smiles and puts his arm on my shoulder and kisses my forehead. He says, "If you were a boy, I'd keep you near me during services. You could help me."

I don't know how to answer this. I am a girl. Should I wish I were a boy? (44)

Thus, in a fundamentalist religious creed, such as the one presented in *The Romance Reader*, it is utterly impossible for females to experience faith as much as males do because of the unreasonable sexiest demands that annul their sense of independence and individuality. This is due to the fact that women's role in Hassidism is basically to be submissive housewives and to beget as many children as they could unstoppably until they acquire "permission from a rabbi," (235) who prays to God for their forgiveness. Moreover, being the oldest daughter of a Hasidic rabbi, Rachel is supposed to set an example for her five siblings as well as to the whole community. Still, Rachel's inclination towards self-fulfillment and self liberation are her most resilient motivating forces to rebel against all the socio-religious restrictions imposed by her Hasidic family. And though Rachel tries hard, against her disposition, to comply with the odd norms and customs of her community, she ends up as a divorcee who is shamefully regretted by her parents and disgracefully disregarded by her community. In fact, Rachel's rebellion is against the adherence to a faith that oppresses women. It is a rebellion against biased and deeply-rooted gender expectation in a repressive patriarchy. This oppression is also the stem of the dissonance in the psyches of Rachel and her mother: the conflict cognitions of their self-esteem and the oppressive existence.

The Romance Reader begins on the sacred day of Sabbath on which observant Jews stay home and do not work. They are not to touch anything or make any sounds; therefore, Rachel says that making any sounds seems "sinful to [her] on Shabbat" (4). However, Rachel's mother commits the sin of using the telephone to call a taxi in order to drive her to the hospital where she is about to give birth to her seventh child. Careful not to touch anything, Rachel's father, a Hasidic rabbi, keeps his hands in his pockets all the time. He comes out of the house and stands beside the taxi waiting for the driver to open the door for him. In spite of the intricacy of the emergency, Rachel's strictly observant parents try not to touch anything as they get into the car:

The driver opens the back door, and Ma gets in, careful not to touch the car. She lowers herself onto the seat sideways, her feet still on the ground, her body facing the door. Then she uses her arms to help bring her legs in.... Father stands near the passenger door, not touching the handle, waiting, and finally the drivers understands and opens the door for him too. (4-5)

As farcical as it may seem, this opening scene sets the ironic tone of the novel. From a first narrative point of view, Rachel shows the absurdity of the perilous observance of the strict Hasidic laws in her household. The pitch of this ironic tone intensifies with the narration of more incidents related to Rachel's existence in an ultra-Orthodox family ironically clinging to centuries-old Talmudic traditions in the modern and liberal American society. This incongruous existential dilemma affects a psychological tug-of-war conflict within Rachel between the inclination toward her liberating self-empowerment and her desire to role-play the rabbi's daughter who is favored by her parents for setting an example for the whole community.

Still, the tension between Rachel and her mother Tovele epitomizes the stereotypical intergenerational conflict between the elders who cling to the religious, ethnic, and communal traditions and the young who want to break free from the shackles of these disempowering traditions. In The Romance Reader, Rachel's mother assumes the pivotal role of the ironically oppressor/ oppressed Jewish mother. On one hand, she is the executioner of the religious laws and the vigilant overseer of the subjugated and oppressed Jewish daughter. On the other hand, as a wife and a mother she is deprived of achieving any personal success or freedom outside the predestined role of a Hasidic woman: a housewife and a mother. Rachel knows well that in the Talmud, there are three kinds of virtuous women: daughter, wife and mother. Likewise, in "*Hardly There Even When She Wasn't Lost*": *Orthodox Daughters and the "Mind-Body Problem,"* Susan Jacobowitz writes that within the world of the ultra-Orthodox Hasidism, "there are no Hasidic women, only mothers, wives and daughters of Hasids" (78). Thus, in this world a woman's value is delimited to her reproductive role. Similarly, her identity is solely recognizable as a possession of a Hasidic man: his wife, the mother of his children or his daughter. Nonetheless, Rachel, the Jewish daughter coming of age within these familial conditions, suffers from the pangs of her inner as well as outer conflicts. Strict acquiescence and subservience to the religious and social norms are demanded from her as the daughter of an ultra-Orthodox rabbi; nevertheless, she cannot curb her rebellious impulse to liberate herself as a human being. In fact, Rachel rebels against a set of centuries-old traditions that confine women within their bodies regardless of their psychological or mental abilities. Still, Tovele, Rachel's mother, is the embodiment of the repressive force of those traditions, who imposes restrictions and impedes any liberating efforts by her daughter. Jacobowitz labels this conflict as "the mind-body dilemma," as she criticizes the depiction of the daughters of the Orthodox Jews in modern American fiction:

Reservations and dilemmas are given voice and made real. The mind-body dilemma—which can also be characterized as a religious-secular dilemma—is never fully and satisfactorily resolved. Without balance or resolution, none

of the protagonists seem completely comfortable with their choices or hopeful about the future. (92)

In Rachel's world there seems to be hardly any chance for balance between the mind and the body: hence, the endless conflict between herself and her mother—the polar opposites between juvenile rebellion and parental repression.

Still as Rachel passes through the difficult years of adolescence—referred to in psychological terms as the pre-oedipal phase—she develops turbulent feelings of pity and hate against her mother: the chief executioner of the Hassidic rule in the Benjamin family. For instance, Rachel feels excited for assuming full responsibility of her younger siblings, role-playing their mother, with a suppressed desire to shun her mother's domineering power on her family. So while her mother is away at the hospital recovering from her seventh delivery, Rachel goes on a stroll with her father and the rest of her siblings. Rachel is jubilant that her mother is away so their transient happiness is not spoiled by her nagging presence:

We walk down Ashley Lane, to Rita Avenue. It's different with only the five of us plus Father, without Ma or Aaron. We're a small, happy family going on a picnic in the middle of March. If Ma were here, there'd be fighting. She doesn't lose a minute letting everyone know what she thinks. She'd be saying it's getting dark out and what are we, crazy, taking the kids out for a picnic in the middle of winter. And she'd be asking, What kind of life is this, a husband, who's not working, not bringing home enough to live on, and what for do we need a synagogue? (14)

At the core of the problem is the fact that Rachel's father is known in the Chassidic community as "the rabbi without any followers." This is because he "doesn't belong to a great dynasty, not Satmar, or Viznitz, or even to a smaller one, Karlin or Lubavitch" (13). Still, for the sake of building a synagogue and becoming its rabbi, Rachel's father imposes on himself and his family a life of seclusion in the suburban "Ashley Country Club," a summer resort about which Rachel says, "Only we live here in winters," where the bungalows all around are "wet and silent, so silent" (13). Thus, in order to fulfill his Gnostic experience Rachel's father wants to start his own pious dynasty. However, his children know, as does their mother, that he is a "crazy dreamer" (15). In fact, Rachel's mother feels oppressed because of her reclusive living with her seven children in seclusion miles away from her family in Israel. With a very limited number

of friends and neighbors, she thinks of this place as a concentration camp, "A wasteland. An American Siberia." Therefore, Tovele tells Benjamin that she wants to live "either in Williamsburg or in Jerusalem," because she wants to live "around [her] own kind" (99).

In fact, neither Rachel's father nor her mother belongs to Jewish rabbinical lineage. Tovele comes from Israel where members of her family, men and women do not belong to a dynasty of rabbis. Likewise, Rachel's father comes from Romania where his forefathers were simple farmers. Yet, the obsession with becoming a Hasidic rabbi in America compels Rachel's father to impose seclusion on himself and his family; to solicit alms from other established synagogues and renowned rabbis; to live cheaply on the meager sales of a book, which he has to pedal from one state to another. Tovele suffers from these repressive circumstances; hence, she never shows any support of Benjamin's dream. Instead, she bluntly threatens him, "I'm warning you. You raise a hammer for that new synagogue you're planning and I'll leave you" (21). Thus, Tovele, a victim of oppression, is always nervous and dangerously on the brink of erupting into violence against others. Rachel is fully aware of this fact as she says, "it's always like this. When Ma's not fighting with father, she's fighting with us. She has to yell at someone. (137)

Pearl Abraham divides her novel into three parts. The first of which includes Rachel's first rebellious act against the strict rules of her Hasidic household. She waits for the right time when her mother goes to New York City for shopping, as she goes every midsummer "when things are on sale," (31) in order to execute her plan and get a membership card at the public library. The plan is that her sister Leah would stay home to answer the librarian on phone. She would say, "Yes, I am Mrs. Benjamin; yes we live in Ashley," so Rachel becomes the owner of a library card entitled to borrow books: six at a time. However, the plan goes wrong when Rachel's father answers the phone instead of her sister. The librarian tells Rachel that she has upset her father for coming to the library without his permission. Rachel, then, wonders, "If I tell her the truth, I wonder, will she help me? Adopt me?"

As soon as Rachel arrives home she is rebuked for this sinful transgression. Benjamin reads for her from the first book of Isaiah how the prophet warns the people of Judea against destruction, pestilence and plague if they try to be like the other nations. Benjamin tells his daughter that a Jew "reads only Jewish books and must remain separate" (34). Rachel, however, feels regretful for being born in a Hasidic family to a rabbi who would not allow the blasphemy of letting his daughter read books in English. Rachel says:

Father told [the librarian] I came without permission. He didn't say why. He didn't say that he would never give me permission to come here. He didn't explain that he's a

Chassidic rabbi, who doesn't allow his children to go to the library. If she knew, she might feel sorry for me, she might be on my side. I think Father knows this. (33)

The reaction of Rachel's parents to her attempt to read English books is very severe. Her father warns her against reading "goyishe" books again, and if ever she does so "[she] will stop going to school" (35). He tells her to read Hebrew or Yiddish books instead. Thus, Rachel feels persecution against her female gender because she is not allowed to read as much as her brothers do in the synagogue. Rachel once again regrets her female gender. She wonders, "If I were a boy, studying hard like David, would I still want to read the library book?" (35) The severest reaction, however, comes from Rachel's mother, Tovele, whose punishment ranges from disdain and rebuke to scandalizing her daughter among the few neighbors who come into contact with the family.

It is worthy of note that Tovele's reaction against her daughter's fits into the definition of psychological projection—one of its symptoms is self-righteous blame shifting. Tovele looks at Rachel, as if "she wants to spit on [her] face," and tells her not to do her any favors, "not with hands that touch dirty books" (36). Sadistic rebuke continues unstopably and it is not only directed against the daughter but also wryly against the father:

Father says, "Enough already. What's done is done. I don't want to hear about it anymore." That doesn't stop Ma. She says, "Look what you're doing to us. Look at your Father; his beard is going gray. All because of your sins." She turns on to Father. "It's all your fault. You've been too lenient, letting them read too much. I didn't finish the fourth grade, that's how my parents raised me." (37)

Turbulent feelings of compunctious regret and fear of scandalizing build up in Rachel, so she feels that, "The women in Ashley look at [her] the way you look at a sinner" (39). Rachel, an oppressed youngster, suffers tremendous psychological agitation, yet her avenging desire does not exceed the limit of an imaginative revenge. Thus, she says, "I want to hit her, she makes me so angry. I want to go around and slap everyone in this house, loud and hard enough that the shape of my hand remains on their cheeks awhile" (38). It is noteworthy how the cycle of psychological projection comes full circle as the mother projects her turbulent feelings of oppression in a patriarchal social system unto her rebellious daughter, who in turn causes her parents to project their own oppression unto one another.

Rachel's resilience, along with her strong inclination to liberate herself, does not stop her from fulfilling her desire. On a Sabbath day, she steals from her father's desk an old paid bill as a proof of residence in order to obtain a library card. In fact, the significance of this situation lies in the ironic perplexed feelings of regret and revenge. Rachel says, "I don't know which is worse, going to the library or stealing and breaking the law of Shabbat" (40). Commenting on these turbulent feelings, which eventually lead to rebellion against deeply ingrained socio-religious rules, Victoria Aarons in *The Outsider Within: Women in Contemporary Jewish-American Fiction*, writes that:

Characteristic of many of the protagonists uncovered in the fiction of Jewish-American women, the rabbi's daughter breaks from the tradition, the life, but can never entirely leave the world of her "father," that world so ingrained, so much at the heart of her identity and her struggle. This kind of ambivalence prevents the female protagonists from living comfortably in either world. For the rabbi's daughter, it breeds resentment, dissatisfaction, a sense of self as a visitor. (338)

This ambivalence reflects the love/hate relation between Rachel and her family and/or her family's religious belief. It is the paradox of Rachel's existence to be both alienated and drawn to her faith and her family. It is, in fact, a problematic socio-religious affiliation in which this female character is expected to play the important role of the subjugated object of patriarchal domination, while she struggles to achieve herself as an independent free person. As a matter of fact, this female character exemplifies the ambivalence of the American Jewish woman towards her heritage, her identity and her gender. It is an existential dilemma of being the "outside within," as Victoria Aarons explicates in her *Women in Contemporary Jewish-American Fiction*:

Contemporary Jewish-American Writers present a different sense of the "outsider." No longer on the outskirts of American culture, nor even of the literary tradition, the characters find themselves paradoxically alienated from and drawn to a heritage from which they are excluded, and yet in which they play an important function—the silent foil of a male dominated tradition. This paradox of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion results in the fragmentation that causes the characters to seek to resolve their ambivalent feelings toward their pasts by trying to create them...it is in this way that the Jewish-American woman, and perhaps, even more so, the Jewish-American woman writer, is the "outsider within" (393)

It is worthy of note that the two oppressed female characters in *The Romance Reader*, Rachel and her mother Tovele, rebel against the patriarchal domination imposed on them by Rabbi Benjamin. Their rebellions, however, lead to different end results according to their positions in the family. Tovele faces her husband with the facts of her poverty and loneliness. She is full of repulsion against the idea of building a synagogue and spending the rest of her life trapped in seclusion as the wife of a rabbi. Tovele holds a knife against her body, threatening to take her own life if Benjamin does not agree to her demands:

Ma screams, "Why do I have to be unhappy all my life, tell me? Why can't I have a little joy, like other mothers, like my mother? I don't deserve this. I work hard enough, raising seven children. Why do I have to live in hell, a burning hell? I should have burned our bungalow down along with the others that night. With my own hands, I should have lit my own home and watched it burn down to the ground, I could've said a flying spark started it. Then I could've taken the insurance money, packed myself and my children, and gotten on the first plane to Israel." (100)

Benjamin acquiesces to Tovele's demand, so she leaves for Israel with their youngest daughter. He also leaves the house on a tour to pedal his book in Brazil. Consequently, Rachel assumes full responsibility of herself and her siblings. With her parents away, Rachel commits two sinful transgressions against the codes of her socio-religious affiliation to the Hasidic faith and community. She starts wearing sheer stockings on her way to school. She also wears a swimsuit in a training program to become a licensed lifeguard. The transgression this time is more serious than reading mundane books in English because it affects the reputation of the daughter of a Hasidic rabbi: the future mother rabbinical scholars. In *Chassidic Community Behavior*, Israel Rubin illuminates the importance of the keeping a "dynastic pattern of succession" of the *tzadik*, Hasidic pious scholars, by lineage rather than discipleship:

It seems then reasonable to assume that one born of "holy seed" is more likely to be a potential *tzadik*. For the father, himself a *tzadik*, no doubt eliminated from the sexual act the element of vulgar carnal pleasure and instead had in mind the fulfilling of a religious command and the bringing of "worthy sons" to this world. One born of such a pure relation is thus

considered a logical candidate to the kind of soul that enables one to develop into a tzadik. (144)

Thus, Rachel, the daughter of a Hasidic rabbi is expected to keep a good reputation to be a suitable match for the sons of other rabbis in order to preserve the holy lineage.

Similarly, Eva Van Loenen elaborates in *Marriage and Sexuality in Pearl Abraham's The Romance Reader and Hush by Judy Brown* that the body of the Hasidic woman in Jewish American fiction by women writers is "used as a site for control over sexuality and female identity" (2-3). The basic idea is that a Hasidic woman's body is not her personal possession as Talmudic laws dictate that women are the property of their men. Women are important properties owned by their fathers and their husbands as means of reproduction within the social and religious framework of Hasidism. Therefore, a woman's body is a problem to the Hasidic ultra-Orthodox men, Loenen explains:

It needs to be contained, controlled, regulated and covered up. Women (lacking the necessary intellectual capacity to study Talmud and understand *halakha*) cannot be trusted to do this themselves. Paradoxically, that which poses the biggest problem, the body of the Jewish woman, is also the most essential. (7)

The second part of The Romance Reader deals with Rachel's adolescence and her rebelliousness against the norms and traditions of her Hasidic household. With the return of Tovele from Israel, Rachel's transient happy independence and non-surveillance comes to an unhappy ending. It is remarkable how Rachel receives the news of the return of her mother. As soon as she receives the telegram "ARRIVING TUSEDAY 8 P.M. STOP A VIDER SEN STOP KISSES MAMA STOP," she engages in an outpouring of evil wishing against her mother. She says, "I don't want her home. ...I want her to stay away, or die" (129-130). She also wishes if she and her siblings "were orphans." And finally she brings two psalms books for herself and her sister in order to pray that "a war starts in Israel and Ma can't come home. Or that her plane crashes" (130).

Nevertheless, Tovele finds out what her daughter has been doing while she was away. Rachel comes back home to find a "pile of panty hose in bits and pieces, blue, black, and beige, all cut up. Beside it is the snorkel, mask, and fins" (135). It is worthy to note how Rachel's father reacts to the two transgressions of the stockings and the swimsuit. For the first transgression, he goes all the way to Williamsburg to see another rabbi, the principal of the Satmar girls' school, in order to discuss the matter and receive proper advice. This, however, deepens Rachel's feelings of repulsion against the social and religious laws, which she now regards with disdain. She becomes

angry because her father “went to Williamsburg to talk to a man about a girl’s stockings. Two men talking about what I should put on my legs. What do they know about girls’ legs, about what’s comfortable, what looks good?” (138). For the second transgression of bathing in a swimsuit, Rachel’s father agrees that Rachel and her sister Leah can go to the training and wear swimsuits as long as “there are only women” (141).

However, Rabbi Benjamin changes his opinion, as soon as his wife tells him that neighbors are speaking about his daughters who wear swimming suits. He says, “People talking that’s not good. That’s not good for your reputations. I thought they all wear bathing suits” (178). Rachel tries to reason with her father that he should care only for the religious law and not for what people say; “You’re just proving that the law has nothing to do with being a Jew. It’s all about people. What will people say? What will people think? That’s what you worry about more than the Torah, that’s the truth. You live for people” (179). Thus, the self-oppressed/oppressive father projects his repressiveness unto his daughter through her mother; as consequence, the daughter rebels and the mother counterattacks both the father and the daughter. Tovele intrudes in the discussion and brings it to an end by blaming her husband for the stubbornness of his daughter whom she calls a whore, “Go. Show yourself nakedik. Shame your family. Go show the world what you’ve got. Like a whore” (183).

Still, as Rachel starts bringing in money from her job as a life-guard, and saving the life of a child that was about to get drowned in the pool, her parents change their minds. Thus, Rachel now can retell the story of the rescue with pride to the neighbors who have been critical of her being a daughter of a rabbi taking a swimming class in swimsuits. It is remarkable how Rachel can see through her parents’ double standards: one time it is legal another it is not depending on what people would think and say and on the money she starts providing for her poor household. Moreover, this double-standardization shows in Rabbi Benjamin’s attitude towards his wife and daughter. In fact, Rabbi Benjamin imposes strict laws pertaining segregation of males and females during participation in the religious practices of praying and reading the Torah. The female members in his family are by religious creed not given much attention as the male members—even though they are mere children. In fact, women—according to Talmudic laws in the *Mishnah Kiddushin*—are exempted from participation in prayers and other religious practices: “women, slaves, and children are exempted” (1:7). Still, women in ultra-Orthodox communities are required to accomplish high achievements in the secular world while their men dedicate themselves to Talmudic studies and pious spiritual

experience. This paradoxical attitude also shows clearly in Rabbi Benjamin's attitude towards his wife's work.

Tovele decides to take a saleswoman job at a fabrics company. She bluntly says, "I want to go out. And I can bring home a few dollars too...I want my own money, so I don't have to wait until you pull out your torn wallet" (193). This rebellious act is definitely argued against by her husband, yet Tovele's counterargument against the seclusion and the poverty imposed on her is undefeatable especially in what concerns earning money for the impoverished family:

Father continues to argue against it. "Think how it looks," he says. "A mother of seven children, a Chassidic mother, selling fabric. A saleslady."

"I'm not ashamed. What's wrong with a saleslady? Better than a shnorrer [beggar]. You won't see me put my hand out for money, the way you do."

"I don't ask for myself; I collect for a good cause. Your mother and grandmothers never thought of going out to work," Father says. "They stayed home all their lives and took care of the house, of their husbands and children. They knew they had everything a woman could want."

"My Mother? Don't look to my mother. Your father was a farmer, he milked cows. He didn't dream of being a rebbele. What do you want me to do? Sit home and watch your building go up? Sit home until my head goes gray thinking about where all the money will come from?" (197)

In *The Women of Williamsburg: A Contemporary American Hasidic Community*, Gershon Kranzler studies the characteristics of Hasidic women in a representative sample of residents of Williamsburg—America's largest Hasidic community. The study shows that "the typical household of the 157 married women has between seven and eight children" (84). Similarly, Rabbi Benjamin's family consists of his wife and seven children. This is due to the fact that, Kranzler explains, birth control is forbidden, "except in cases of serious health problems." Moreover, Kranzler reveals the fact that women in the Hasidic household are the actual breadwinners because the males dedicate themselves to full-time Talmudic studies. Thus, Kranzler, writes, "the girls need to be able to help their parents financially, earn their own upkeep, and save money for their wedding and the establishment of their home" (85). This paradoxical attitude of the patriarchal society results in the irony of disempowering women by entrapping them within the role-playing of the reproductive domesticated members while demanding them to provide for their unemployed spouses:

Even after having one or more children, 85 of husbands in the survey devoted themselves to intensive, full-time study.

Hence they depend on the limited income of their wives, who hold jobs before or in between having children. Therefore, the Hasidic girls must prepare themselves for a vocation that will enable them to carry this responsibility until their husbands begin working as rabbis, teachers, ritual functionaries, or after training for a trade or a career in business, work in secular fields. (86)

Likewise, in "*Hardly There Even When She Wasn't Lost*": *Orthodox Daughters and the "Mind-Body Problem" in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction*, Susan Jacobowitz refers to the discrepancy pertaining Hasidic women's position in their families. Educating females is not as essential or required as educating males; nonetheless, females are required to excel in the secular world. Therefore, she writes, "the high achievement in the secular world is meant to contrast with the traditional position of women in Judaism, particularly with regard to religious education" (79).

Thus, Hasidic women are expected to be selfless wives, mothers and daughters forever in the service of the Hasidic men and their children. Nevertheless, the Hasidic woman is required to be a buffer against the secular world of sinful temptation and to be paradoxically in permanent negotiation with it in order to provide for their men. Commenting on this paradoxical existence and repressive role playing of the Hasidic woman, Van Loenen writes in *Marriage and Sexuality in Pearl Abraham's The Romance Reader and Hush by Judy Brown*:

She forms a buffer between the Hasidic world of men filled with Torah study and the evil *goyische* world filled with temptations from the *sitra achra* [the other side]. While Hasidic women are required to fulfill any necessary participation in the *goyische* world (by having jobs to provide an income, doing groceries, learning English etc.), Hasidic men are protected from it. (3)

Consequently, Rabbi Benjamin in *The Romance Reader* acquiesces to the demand of his wife to go out for work as a saleswoman, as much as he lets his daughter work as a lifeguard in a swimming pool in order to provide for the family and her own upkeep. In fact, this is a remarkable turning point as the father who oppresses his family under the pretense of piety and conservativeness meekly submits under the pressure of the need for money that would be easily gained by the female members of his family.

The second part of *The Romance Reader* also deals with the idea of marriage arrangement in the Hasidic family. Though an essential role is

played by the mother preparing her daughter for the marriage, the main part of arranging the marriage is that of her father. Due to the fact that Hasidic community is a patriarchy and the daughter, according to the Talmud, is her father's property, the father asks the matchmaker, another member of the patriarchy, to find a groom for his daughter. The main purpose of the father is to marry off his daughter, preferably to the son of a Talmudic scholar, in order to set a pattern for her siblings and guarantee a dynasty of Talmudic scholars by marrying his son to the daughter of a rabbi. Rachel is quite aware of this fact as she says, "He wants to hurry me into marriage before I know what's what. I'm only a daughter, and not one who will bring honor to this family. He wants to get to David. For David he can choose from the best" (200).

Rachel thinks that one possible way to liberate herself from the shackles the Hasidic rules—imposed by her domineering parents—is to become independently free as a married woman. Rachel says, "I don't care whom I marry. Once married, I at least won't have to worry about it. Married, I'll do and wear what I want. I'll be who I am." (204). It becomes clear, however, that marriage in the Hasidic tradition requires more adhering to the laws than what is required of her as an unmarried woman. To begin with, the traditions of marriage do not allow for dating or love affairs. The marriage is negotiated and arranged via the intermediacy of a matchmaker. Young women are hurried to marriage as soon as the matchmaker suggests a possible match: usually the first proposed is the one agreed on. Gershon Kranzler refers to this fact in his *The Women of Williamsburg: A Contemporary American Hasidic Community* "no dating, teenage affairs, courting, or love-marriages exist in the Hasidic community. Amateur and professional matchmakers arrange the marriages. Of the 157 married women in the survey, 156 were married between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two" (89-90).

Typically, Rachel's marriage comes through the shadchan [the matchmaker], who told her father that her chances are not good because of what she wears. Tovele tells Rachel, "You're not so desirable. The shadchan said that there are rumors that you're modern; he asked what kind of stockings you wear. Father convinced him you wear the best" (200). The fact, however, is that although Rachel's father went through the trouble of traveling to Williamsburg to see a rabbi about what kind of stockings his daughter should wear, and he even bought them for her, she kept the habit of changing them outside the house everyday on her way to school. She even confronts her father in a rebellious manner. She tells him "I'll never wear stockings with seams. You want stockings with seams, you wear them" (203). Rachel's father, then, tells her that the shadchan told him "David's rebbe wants him as a son-in-law." He also tells her mother "Who'd want to marry a girl who lies to her own parents. Tell me. We'll have to be satisfied with whatever comes. The first that comes" (204). In

fact, Rachel's parents want to get rid of her by marrying her off to whosoever comes first before she does more damage to the reputation of the family as Van Loenen explains:

Rachel's parents are anxious to marry off their impossibly unchaste, rebellious daughter before she can do more damage to her (and consequently her family's) reputation. Besides, her brother David, the crown jewel of the family, cannot marry before his older sister and therefore Rachel's father wants to hurry Rachel into a marriage as soon as possible so he can direct his attention to his more worthy second child. (8)

Rachel envies the other non-religious regular families who do not have to suffer from self-imposed seclusion or poverty. Rachel tells her mother that she doesn't want someone like her father because she does not want "to be poor all [her] life" (206). She wishes to lead a normal life like that of her friend Elke, who "doesn't have to be a model for the community, to live for what people think and say. And they have a regular income. Her father works for a living; they don't have to wait for the mail, to see if there will be enough to pay for the groceries" (207). Still, Rachel's real life is the total opposite of what she wishes for. Marriage is not optional in the Hasidic community. It is not a matter of free choice because parents are anxious to marry their daughters as soon as the matchmaker suggests a match for them. If a girl refuses the suggested matches, rumors spread and her chances become scarce. In the case of Rachel—a rebellious daughter whose reputation is suspected by the matchmaker—her parents are so keen to marry her off as soon as the matchmaker suggests a possible match. Therefore, Rachel's father does not pay much attention to the fact that Israel Mittelman, the suggested son-in-law, is not the son of a rabbi. In fact, the Mittelmans are ironically the family that wishes for a daughter-in-law whose father is a rabbi because this would give access to their son to become a rabbi in the future. Thus, even though Rachel expresses her wish not to marry the son of a rabbi in order not to repeat the misery of her mother's difficult life and poverty, she ironically marries into a well-to-do family whose son wants to become a rabbi through his connection with his father-in-law. So, as Susan Jacobowitz elaborates, through Rachel's body, the Mittelmans will be able to "have access to a connection with her father's mind" (3).

At the beginning, Rachel thought that getting married would give her freedom and make her an independent person. So she says, "Maybe living

with Israel will be everything I want. I won't have to tell anyone where I'm going. I'll be free to read when I want, to stop reading when I'm ready. I'll wear anything, almost anything...Maybe just to get away from Father and Ma and everyone telling me what to say"(229). In fact, Rachel wishes to achieve liberation from this mesh of misogynistic patriarchy. However, Rachel's marriage fails as she finds out that her husband is replicating her father in order to become his disciple. Paradoxically, she thinks that marriage is a means of achieving freedom; nevertheless, it means increased entrapment because her identity becomes more dependent on a husband who turns out to be a copy of her father. It is a paradox explicated by Van Loenen in *Marriage and Sexuality in The Romance Reader and Hush by Judy Brown*, "in order to have things of her own, live by herself, she needs to become someone's wife. Her dependence on her husband is emphasized by the fact that she says 'Mrs. Someone', she will give up her own last name, representative of her (single) identity and become her husband's appendage. (10)

The wedding night, in addition, turns to be a total failure as the rudiments of male potency fails Israel. This is repeated every time Israel tries to consummate his marriage to Rachel. Israel wears short pants like Rachel's father and spends the first morning after the wedding night with him in synagogue. Rachel, as a result, becomes full of spite that her newly-wedded husband is following the directions of her father, from whose domineering grip she has thought would be free through marriage. Rachel says:

Father and Israel together. Father will ask questions, and Israel will answer. He'll answer everyone, tell all, and I feel hot thinking of what he will say. Then I think about Father's advice, telling Israel how to do it properly, how to penetrate me, his daughter. Why not have him in bed with us, to show us, to just do it to me, and what then do I need Israel for, lying in bed uselessly beside me? (257-258)

Following the directions of Rachel's father and imitating him, Israel totally depersonalizes himself. So he wears what Rabbi Benjamin orders him to wear and reports his orders to Rachel, who eventually decides to run away. Eventually, Rachel returns to her family after being divorced. She becomes an outcast though she lives with her parents and siblings. Rachel becomes a family disgrace and everyone disregards her existence. Rachel says:

I'm home but not home. I look at Leah, Sarah, Aaron, and Esther. David and Levi are in yeshiva. I can never be one of the children again. I'm a stranger in this house. Esther follows me around with her big brown eyes, questioning eyes. I help her with what she needs no help in: homework. I don't belong here. (294)

Broadly defined, psychological projection is a defense mechanism through which a person displaces unwanted attributes, threats or oppression onto another person. In Freudian terms, the ego transfers—projects—outward what is troublesome or painful inside. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud says, “it is fair to assume, however, that this tendency [projection] becomes stronger when the projection into the outer world offers psychic relief” (46). In her Ph.D. thesis, Trudie Silman Goldmann classifies projection into four types. The first type of projection is “complementary projection,” in which the individual projects onto other “persons a trait which is different from the trait of which he is the conscious possessor.” The second type of projection is “attributive projection,” in which the individual projects onto other people characteristics which are “identical to his own, and which he is consciously aware of possessing himself.” A third type is the “similarity projection,” which refers to the defense mechanism by an individual who projects” traits identical to those which he possesses but the possession of which he is not aware.” And finally, Goldmann defines the fourth type of projection as one in which an individual projects onto other persons “the opposite of the traits which he unconsciously harbors” (7).

In *The Romance Reader* the Hasidic mother-daughter relationship exemplifies the second type of “similarity” projection. Tovele projects her own negative feelings of being a victim of oppression in an ultra-Orthodox patriarchal society onto her daughter Rachel; nevertheless, she is unconscious of suffering from the same oppressed feelings. This is a typical defense mechanism of the mother’s ego against her oppressed wishes to liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchal Hasidism. Tovele projects the oppression she unconsciously suffers from onto her daughter as means of denying her own. This defense mechanism is further explained by Goldmann:

According to psychoanalytic theory, the offending cognition or effect is unacceptable to the superego, thus producing a state of tension leading to attribution or some other tension reducing process. Crucial to the classical psychoanalytic notion is the assumption that projection occurs to the extent that “bad” impulses are denied, and insight into their possession is lacking. Therefore in theory, projection performs an ego defensive function by protecting the individual from the knowledge that he possesses undesirable characteristics. Hence, one might hypothesize that the more difficult it is to deny possession of undesirable

characteristics, the less should be the tendency to engage in similarity projection onto others. (14)

The Romance Reader is a fictional work that traces the development of Rachel's personality and her passage through the difficult years of adolescence, yet it ends with the failure of her arranged premature marriage. The relationship between Rachel and her mother involves a number of clashes between them over a number of issues—all pertaining to modesty and adhering to the rules of the Hasidic community. The mother-daughter relationship in this novel usually features a battle of wills in which Rachel goes to the extreme by sidestepping the restrictions imposed by her oppressive mother. Nevertheless, it is worthy of note that Rachel's mother—always unhappy and dangerously aggressive—is an oppressed person who projects her negative paranoid feelings onto her first born child in an unconscious manner. In *Freud Revisited: Psychoanalytic Themes in the Postmodern Age*, Roger Horrocks elaborates on the relation between this negative feeling of paranoia and inflicting pain unto others:

We might argue that intense paranoia illustrate this phenomenon perfectly: for the paranoid person—who projects her own hostility and mistrust onto others—tends to find that she is treated badly, thus confirming the correctness of the paranoid view. Indeed, at the unconscious level one can argue that paranoia seeks out ill-treatment and avoids love, for it is love that is dreaded above all and must be shunned. Paranoid people are righteously unhappy. (105)

In fact, Tovele suffers from the dissonance between her self-image and the facts of her repressive life as a Hasidic wife physically and financially burdened by her seven children. Tovele, in addition, suffers seclusion away from modern life imposed by her husband. As a consequence, Rachel and her siblings share their mother's feelings of being secluded from normal life, even according to the standards of the largest Hassidic community in Williamsburg. So Rachel wonders why does her father imposes isolation on their family away from Williamsburg and reaches the conclusion that "He can't have his own synagogue here, but he could be like everyone else, a Chassid who lives near his rebbe, who prays with his rebbe everyday. But father doesn't want to be just a Chassid. He wants to be the rebbe" (96). This explains why Tovele laments that fact that she is oppressed by her husband's self-imposed seclusion and poverty, and demands him to let them live "either in Williamsburg or in Jerusalem," because she wants "live around [her] my own kind" (99). The dissonance suffered by Tovele is between her expectations for a happy marital life and her real life as an oppressed and needy person. Tovele yells at her husband:

“What about the money and the work?” Ma says. “Even if you don’t care that I kill myself with work, where will you get the money? Out of my underpants? The Kolel check you get every month isn’t enough for a pair of newlyweds, never mind a family of nine. With those few dollars you want to start giving Kiddish. Then you’ll want that new synagogue. Bad enough you waste hours and hours writing, bent over the table scribbling.

And for what? Pennies. That’s all that will ever come of it. I’m warning you. You raise a hammer for that new synagogue you’re planning, and I’ll leave you.” (21)

Rachel observes that her mother is permanently angry and “always threatening” (22). Chronically a nervous person, Tovele is always projecting her anger on to others, as Rachel says, “It’s always like this. When Ma’s not fighting with Father, she’s fighting with us. She has to yell at someone” (137). And when her father is at home her mother is “mostly angry at him for being away so much, for leaving her all alone, and for planning to build a new synagogue” (71).

In *The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture*, Martha A. Ravits investigates the negative image of the Jewish mother in American literature. She explains that this negative image “combines the misogyny of both the American and the Jewish patriarchal traditions. As an ethnic woman, she bears what feminists call double oppression and surplus visibility” (8). Likewise, the idea of double oppression has been tackled by other researchers who theorize that Jews throughout history have assumed the role of minority populations usually entrapped within self-imposed seclusion either as occupational or religious communities. In *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life* Aviva Cantor explains that the oppression of Jewish women comes as a result of the self-imposed oppression and seclusion of Jewish males—under the false pretension that they are the subalterns of the social majorities. As members of minority groups among other populations, Jewish males have always projected paranoiac feelings onto their Jewish females, as well as other negative attributes of which they are unconsciously unaware. Cantor draws attention to the following analogy:

The Jews’ condition in Exile is analogous in many ways to the oppression of women, who are also powerless under patriarchy and are affected by power struggles they are not part of and by their outcome. Lacking self-determination

over their own destinies, Jews were as are women, other objects rather than subjects, forced to be reactive rather than active and to respond to others' demands. (14)

In *The Romance Reader*, Rachel's father secludes himself from the modern world. Totally immersed in his Talmudic studies, with no real job or a regular income, he is an incompetent breadwinner of his family. He cannot secure a permanent place for his family as his itinerant search for spiritual experience demands constant traveling Cantor explains:

Her husband is following the way of the wandering Baal Shem that he's in search of new experiences like Reb Bunam of Pshiskhe. This was the life of the founders of the Chassidism, and Father wants to be their disciple. Like the founders, he moved far away to America, to forsaken Ashely, to start a new community. (64)

Tovele is a lonesome Hasidic wife and an overburdened mother, who raises seven children in a secluded area for the sake of her husband who wants to build his own synagogue and to become its rabbi. Tovele is caught in a limbo between the surreal dreams of her husband and the real demands of her household, which she has to manage with the meager income of her husband—all of which is charity donated by other established synagogues. The dissonance between the image of her super-ego as an observant Jewess, a faithful wife, and a self-effacing mother and her oppressive seclusion and poverty triggers her paranoiac feelings of victimization. As a result, Tovele projects her victimization onto her children, especially her first born, Rachel. Psychological projection, however, can be exemplified by some behaviors such as self-righteous condemnation of others, xenophobia, and blame shifting.

Tovele is always portrayed as a nervous wife and mother: constantly engaged in neurotic fits of anger against her first-born Rachel and her Husband. She self-righteously condemns her daughter of bringing shame unto the family. She even calls her a "sinner" for not abiding to the rules of their Hasidic society when she reads "goyishe" books. First, she tells her that she doesn't want any favors from a girl with dirty hands that "touch dirty books" (36). Then, she keeps scandalizing her daughter in front of everyone as she "won't let anyone forget" (37). Thus, Rachel is scandalized and condemned for being a sinner by her own mother who finds masochist satisfaction in making her and her father feel ashamed:

The thing about Ma is she can talk about the same thing for about a month. She says, "Mrs. Beck called to say how shocked she is, the rabbi's daughter at the library." Father looks down not saying anything. That doesn't stop Ma. She enjoys making me uncomfortable in front of him, like she is

making me pay for my sins. She continues. "I didn't know what to say. What do you say to someone when unfortunately it's true and you're burning with shame? Your own daughter at the library, reading *trafe* books." She stops and looks around from one of us to the next, and I do what Father does and look down.

Ma continues, even louder now. "I had to swallow it, and it hurt going down. My eldest daughter. This is the example she sets for the younger ones. This is the kind of name she's giving the family."

Father says, "Enough already. What's done is done. I don't want to hear about it anymore." That doesn't stop Ma. She says, "look what you're doing to us. Look at your Father; his beard is going gray. All because of your sins." She turns on Father. "It's all your fault. You've been too lenient, letting them read too much. I didn't finish the fourth grade, that's how my parents raised me." (37)

Tovele, in addition, is a verbal aggressor as she calls her daughter a "*shiksa*," which has derogatory connotations both in Yiddish and Hebrew. In fact, a "*shiksa*" connotes impurity and debauchery in a woman. Thus, for the transgression of wearing sheer stockings to school, Rachel's mother calls her two daughters, Rachel and Leah "*shiksas*." Upon discovering the stockings in their room she screams, "What did you think? A mother wouldn't know? I knew last night. A mother feels. Stocking so see-through you may as well not wear any. What do you want to be, two *shiksas*? Outcasts?" (135).

Tovele, also, calls her daughter a "whore" for wearing a swimsuit. Self-righteously, she condemns her husband and her daughters by referring to her upbringing in Israel as a more conservative and observant one in comparison to her daughters' liberal upbringing in America. In a better than thou mode, Tovele holds the swimsuit with the tip of her fingers, then asks her daughter:

"You're not embarrassed to wear these?" she asks. "If my mother saw me wearing a little nothing like this, she'd have pulled my hair out. She wouldn't have let me live. I thought sleeveless jumper was bad enough. In America, things are modern. My mother always said every Jew in America has a little pig in his stomach." (142)

She wryly blames her husband for raising a daughter who “listens to no one but herself,” and “does as she pleases” (180). Then she shifts to her daughter insulting her, “Go. Show yourself *nakedik*. Shame your family. Go show the world what you’ve got. Like a whore” (183). Thus, being the object of her mother psychological projection, Rachel develops the negative feelings of hatred against her cursing mother and incompetent father. Now a “cursed whore,” Rachel wishes she becomes an orphan, “Life would be better without parents....Why do people feel so sorry for orphan?” (184).

However, as Rachel becomes able to provide for herself by earning money from her job as a rescue swimmer, her mother does not attack her anymore. In fact, Tovele follows suit and asks her husband to go out to work as a saleslady because she “is not ashamed.” Tovele faces her husband, “What’s wrong with a saleslady? Better than a shnorrer [beggar]. You won’t see me put my hand out for money, the way you do” (197). It is worthy to note that Rachel becomes convinced that she is bad person, so she says, “If Ma went out more, saw more, she’d be worse than me” (197).

The third part of Abraham’s novel The Romance, deals with Rachel’s hurried engagement and premature marriage. With neither a chance to get-to-know the proposed husband nor a love relationship, Rachel’s parents rush their stubbornly disobedient daughter to an arranged marriage. The tension between the mother and her daughter escalates again over the Hasidic modesty code of covering the married woman’s head with a wig. According to the teaching of the Hasidism, a married woman should never expose her natural hair to anyone except her husband—not even to her own children. A Hasidic married woman is required to shave her hair completely and to cover her bald head with a scarf when at home. When she goes out, a Hasidic woman covers her head with a wig, and sometimes with a scarf over her wig. In *World of Our Mothers*, Lore Dickstein explains that the Hasidic rules for women’s modesty are very strict because, “the modest dress and wig-clad heads of the women are based on the notion that women are “Lilith personified: sinful, sexually provocative, distracting to the life of the mind.” Rachel, however, rebels against this modesty code even before she gets married. She says, “I’m expected to wear a wig with a hat, like Mrs. Mittleman. Father says why not do even better; wear what your mother wears. He doesn’t know that after I’m married, when he and Ma can’t tell me what to do, I won’t even wear the hat” (219). Rachel, in addition, thinks that if all women refuse to shave their hairs, “the rabbis would have to rethink the laws, change them” (219).

Rachel’s mother, however, does not waste time to see that her daughter shaves her hair after her first wedding night. So, as soon as it is morning, Rachel’s mother dashes into her daughter’s house carrying shaving equipment and filled with determination to shave her hair. Rachel says, “It’s Ma. I stand there, not welcoming her...she walks in past me, goes straight to the bedroom, and takes the old electric razor out of the box she’s carrying

under her arm” (254). In fact, Rachel’s mother is keener on accomplishing this mission for the sake of reputation than she is concerned with following the religious law itself. First, Tovele reminds Rachel that she is “Chassidishe daughter” (254), then she tells her, “Think of the scandal. Rabbi Benjamin’s first daughter with full head of hair.” This situation ends with Rachel shaving her head by herself; nevertheless, she is left alone to suffer bangs of anger and remorseful disgust. Rachel feels humiliated by this action and entrapped just like “Jews in concentration camps.” She says, “I run my hands over my head and feel nauseous, like I’m pregnant. I stick my finger into the back of my throat and chock, but nothing come up” (256).

Thus, Rachel’s mother who suffers from bouts of paranoia to the extent of threatening to take her own life is not a role model for her daughter. In fact, the relationship between the mother and her daughter in The Romance Reader is of a conflictual nature. The mother reveals excessive narcissistic over identification with her daughter, the projective nature of which shows in her verbal abuse against her; her physical aggressiveness; and her intrusive manipulation of her life. For instance, when Rachel receives her mother in the morning after her wedding, she notices how her mother casts an investigating look at her bed in order to find a trace of blood “as a sign that [she’s] no longer a virgin. Her looking disgusts [her]” (254). When Rachel is life-guarding at the swimming pool, she feels that her mother’s eyes are “on [her] naked legs and arms. Between [her] thighs” (158). The tension in this situation escalates between an obsessive mother, suffering from a false empathy of narcissistic over-identification with her child, and a growing daughter whose developing independence as a woman compels her to rebel against being possessed. So, Rachel says:

I wish I’d worn my robe, sat lifeguarding in my robe. I wish she hadn’t caught me naked. I think about wrapping my towel about me, but I hold back. I don’t want Ma to see my embarrassment. I get up and stand, uncomfortably bare. Before she leaves, Ma walks over. Quietly, for only me to hear, she says, “Aren’t you ashamed? Walking around in front of these small children like that, naked. Showing everything you’ve got to these children.” Everything I’ve got. Breasts, hips, and thighs. The body of a woman. (185-186)

In The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, Nancy Chodorow explains that one of the predominant mother-

daughter psychotic distortions is the “prolongation of the normal preoedipal relation,” which pertains to their perception of oneness and interchangeability with their daughters. Distortion occurs when the mother cannot give up her hyper-symbiosis with her daughter who is developing her own independent character. Chodorow explains that it is the time that

Daughters began to differentiate themselves mentally from their mothers and to practice physical separation, these mothers became “hypersymbiotic.” Having denied their daughters the stability and security of a confident early symbiosis, they turned around and refused to allow them any leeway for separateness or individuation. Instead, they now treated their daughters and cathected them as a narcissistic physical and mental extension of themselves, attributing their own body feelings to them. The mothers took control over their daughters’ sexuality and used their daughters for their own autoerotic gratification. (100)

This relational hyper-symbiosis characterizes Tovele’s intrusive manipulation of Rachel’s life. Though Tovele is not directly using Rachel for autoerotic gratification, she attempts to achieve gratification of her sexuality through identification with Rachel’s new sex life.

For instance, Tovele tells Rachel that love comes after having sex in her first wedding night. She is, however, oblivious of the age difference between herself and her daughter; as much as, she is unable to realize that her daughter’s sex life is not necessarily a reincarnation of her own. Rachel says:

As if sex with a man is supposed to make you better, softer, more religious. Ma thinks that after I’m married I’ll start wearing seams if Israel asks me. She says, “Wait and see. Plenty if girls do. They’re in love with their husbands, and he just has to ask them at the right moment and they do it. A smart boy asks right after the first night; it’s the best time to get the girl to agree. (219)

The over domineering omnipotent mother in this relationship prolongs primary identification with her daughter who, adversely, seeks freedom in detaching herself as a complete and an autonomous woman. Still, the daughter’s rejection of her mother domineering does not lead to eventual separation from her. Instead, the daughter develops oedipal attachment to her mother as well as her father. Chodorow further explains that a daughter may turn to her father—as a “change of love object” in terms of psychoanalysis—though she cannot sever her attachment to her mother completely:

A girl does “turn” to her father, and experiences her mother as a rival. This change of object, however, is founded on a lack of change. It is based in a girl's relation to her mother, both as this has become part of her internal object-world and ego defenses and as this relationship continues to be important and to change externally as much as, or maybe more than, her relationship to her father. Moreover, this turn cannot be absolute because of the depth of her maternal attachment and because of the emotional and physical distance of her father (now and previously). And oedipal girl, according to psychoanalysts, oscillates between attachment to her mother and her father. (129)

In *The Romance Reader* Rachel experiences this object change towards her father, though unconsciously. After marriage, she realizes that her husband Israel is a weak-willed person, whose imitation of her father results in the adverse effect of achieving independence. Rachel realizes that her father is continuing his control over her life through her spineless husband. She says, “Everywhere I turn, there's Father. But I don't see him.” Therefore, she retaliates severely by mistreating Israel in order to fight against her father's domination. Rachel links between her shrewdness against her husband and her mother's shrewdness against her father. So, she says, “I'm a mean shrew, a bitter hag without teeth. One day of marriage, and I'm worse than Ma already. I'm beginning to understand her better” (263). In fact, Rachel's mistreatment of her husband is a re-enactment of the relation between her father and her mother, as well as a reflection of the psychological symbiotic attachment between her and her mother. So, Rachel wonders what keeps her mother married to her father in spite of these repressive circumstances. She wonders why she left her homeland Jerusalem with her “Father in the first place?” She also wonders why when she had the chance, “when she went for a visit, why did she come back?” And though her mother had told her and her siblings that she came back for them, she didn't believe it. She says that her mother came back because she loved her father. Then, she engages in a day-dream fantasy imaging her parents in copulation; nevertheless, she involuntarily imagines her father toppling her instead of her mother:

I was sure she was back for Father. I laughed at her love for father. I try to picture for the hundredth time Father's face above Ma's, and for the first time I can see him there. I can see him in place of Israel last night, and now it is as if he were above me there in the dark, my father above me, in bed

with me, in the dark. I suddenly wonder whether Ma really loves Father. (264)

In *Freud's Dora, Dora's Hysteria: the Negation of a Woman's Rebellion* Maria Ramas writes that sexual fantasy is “modeled by and interbound with the social meaning of sexual difference” (485). In Rachel's fantasy, her father is imagined to be above her mother, in confirmation of the social implications of woman's subjugation to man in traditional patriarchal societies. Rachel is raised as a Hassidic woman who is expected to role play the subjugated wife by her husband. Still, in reality Rachel's husband fails to consummate his marriage, and hence he becomes incompetent, according to the patriarchal rule, as a man illegible to topple his wife. Rachel, as a result, shifts her fantasy to her father as a subconsciously normal consequence of her feminine oedipal complication. It is, in fact, the crucial point when Rachel decides she must leave out because she realizes that she must do what her mother should have done long ago. Rachel says:

I suddenly wonder whether Ma really loves Father. What should she have done? What she didn't do I must do. I must get away, far away, where Father and Ma and Israel and the world can't reach me. I want to go where no one knows me, a place where I won't know myself. I want to forget that I'm married, that I belong to a man, that my head is shaved. (264)

According to psychoanalysis, the fantasy of the “primal scene” involves sexual intercourse with the subconscious object of love. Ramas explains that in women passing through the phase of oedipal complex, this primal scene may depict the “submission and degradation of whoever is in the feminine position.” The fantasy, she adds, “may be mild in content, or it may reach to the extreme other end of the continuum to express a sadomasochistic desire that seeks ultimate satisfaction in the total annihilation of the woman—the feminine” (485).

In his *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, Freud theorizes that the originating force behind fantasies and dreams is the subconscious wish-fulfilling motivation to overcome unsatisfying realities and satiate unquenchable desires—usually of erotic nature. Accordingly, dreams in psychoanalysis are a major source of insight into the unconscious desires of subjects who are unable to express these desires openly due to the restrictive codes of the social structures they exist in. According to Freud, it is usually an unhappy person with an unsatisfied desire who engages in day-dreaming fantasies or have dreams:

A happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a

correlation of unsatisfying reality. These motivating wishes vary according to the sex, character and circumstances of the person who is having the phantasy: but they fall naturally into two main groups. They are either ambitious wishes, which serve to elevate the subject's personality; or they are erotic ones. (423)

In Pearl Abraham's *The Romance Reader*, Rachel has a wish-fulfilling dream, in which all her wishes for a male partner are fulfilled in the person of Mr. Gartner, the owner of swimming pool where she lifeguards. It is, nonetheless, worthy of note that Rachel's day-dreaming fantasy—in which she tries to picture her parents in coitus and sees her father above her instead of her husband—could be interpreted as her Oedipus dream. Still, that phantasy is of greater importance than the dream, as Susan Budd explains in her *The Shark Behind the Sofa: The psychoanalytic Theory of Dreams*, due to the fact that “Many analysts came to believe that these unconscious phantasies are ubiquitous; they underlie all thought and feeling, and therefore dreams are a less important and special means of communicating them” (142). So, Rachel's stronger attachment is to her father as an object of love, yet her wish-fulfilling dream works on displacing this object of love by its antithesis.

For instance, in the dream, Mr. Gartner is a well-dressed and well-built beau in opposition to her father the rabbi who is always exclusively dressed in his Orthodox attire. Mr. Gartner “pulls up in his Jaguar and leans over to open the door” (162) for Rachel, unlike her father who “stands near the passenger door, not touching the handle, waiting” (5) for the driver of the taxi to understand it is Sabbath so he opens the door for him. Unlike her bearded father, Mr. Gartner in the dream “has shaved dry skin” against which she wants to “rub [her] face and [her] whole naked body” (162). Mr. Gartner drives a Jaguar that “feels like a cat” as it “glides smoothly” (163), unlike her father's worn out car which she hates to see him driving; “he does it all so slowly, watching him makes me want to jump out of my skin. With him driving, you feel as if you're standing still all the way to your destination” (76). And unlike her father who travels all the way to Williamsburg in order to buy her kosher stockings, Mr. Gartner buys her a fiery red silk dress with matching underwear and “silky black stockings.” Thus, she changes out from “[her] white panties into the red lace ones” (164). Still, this dream does not end with the primal scene of sexual intercourse between Rachel and Mr. Gartner. Rachel says that she wakes up just when Mr. Gartner was undressing in front of her bed. It is remarkable, still, that she tries to dream of him again but cannot do it. She tries to

imagine him with a beard and dressed like her father but it does not work either because he is a completely different person from him:

I close my eyes and try to bring Mr. Gartner back, but it doesn't work. Once my eyes are open, even if it's just for a second, I can't do it. I try to think of him with a beard and peyess, someone father could accept as my husband, and laugh. He could never pass for a Chassid. Everyone could tell he's not by his smell, and his body, and the way he walks. (168)

In *Psychoanalytic Literary criticism*, Maud Ellmann refers to Lacan's reaffirmation of the symbiotic relationship of dreams and symbols that owe their form to both the principles of figurative speech and the unconscious that is structured like a language. So, according to Lacan "the unconscious processes of condensation and displacement correspond respectively to metaphor and to metonymy." And consequently, "If the conscious operates according to the strategems of rhetoric, this means that psychoanalysis and literary criticism are united by common object of investigation: the boundless creativity of tropes" (5). Similarly, in *Psychoanalysis and American Literary Culture*, Albert E. Stone writes that "Society is in Freudian terms both the engine of repression and the fountainhead of language from which the writer draws metaphors for his discontent" (312). Still, Stone emphasizes the role of the psychoanalytic critic to unite the expression of both the "the real world of culture and the surreal expressions of the artist" (315).

Accordingly, Pearl Abraham's artistic expression in *The Romance Reader* presents an intelligent, though oppressed, female narrator engaged in a fierce psychopathic struggle for emancipation. It is a portrait of an intelligent young woman full of resilience to liberate herself from the shackles of a constantly misogynous patriarchy while maintaining her mind and personal determination against all odds. It is, in fact, an extended metaphor of oppression and projection, and revenge. The relationship between the mother and her daughter in this repressive family structure exemplifies the relationship between the executioner and its victim. The mother's repressed feelings of anger at her seclusion in the country are spilled over her daughter in constant assaults. Limited in education and possibility by socio-religious codes of this repressive society, this mother projects onto her daughter the taboos and constrictions that limit the roles of women in this society mainly to their homes, husbands and children, often imposing on her the feelings of shame of her body and her mind. In other words, the relation between Rachel and her mother is a conflictual nature: a constant battle of wills. On one hand, there is the oppressed mother who pours over her daughter her physical and financial burden of seven children while projecting onto her a pathetic fear of social shame. And on the other

hand, there is the daughter who rebels in order to gain her freedom though at a high price because there is no compromise. It is a high price to pay because Rachel has to choose either to suffer oppression or to become a shameful pariah standing entirely outside God's circle.

المستخلص

قراءة نقدية لـنفسية الإسقاط في علاقة الأم و أبنيتها في رواية بيرل إبراهيم قارئة الروايات الرومانسية أحمد الكحكي

تصور رواية بيرل إبراهيم الأولى قارئة الروايات الرومانسية (1995) الصراع بين الحسيدة و الحداثنة كما هو مُمثل في العلاقة التصادمية بين الشخصية النسائية الرئيسية ريتشل بنيامين و أمها توفيل. ولدت ريتشل لـحاحام حسيدى يسعى لتحقيق تجربته الغنوصية بأن يفرض على نفسه و عائلته العزلة بعيداً عن طرق الحياة الحديثة في أمريكا. لذا نجد أن ما يعتبره الآخرون من مُسلمات الحياة العادية هي أمور مُحرمة تماماً على عائلة بنيامين الحسيدية. نرى ريتشل أبنة الحاحام الكبرى محرومة من أى إنغماس متحرر في الحياة الحديثة مثل قراءة الكتب باللغة الإنجليزية أو الإستماع للمذياع أو السباحة بثوب السباحة. و تماشياً مع عرف الجماعة الحسيدية يتم زواج ريتشل على نحو مُسبق الترتيب في سن غير ناضجة. يقدم هذا البحث قراءة نقدية نفسية للعلاقة بين ريتشل و أمها التي تجسد مفارقة أن تكون الجلاذ و الضحية لقوانين الحسيدية القاهرة. إلا أن الرواية تحكى عن الصراع الدائم بين أم ريتشل و أبنيتها شديدة العناد في عدم الإنصياع. تبدأ ريتشل عصيانها بحصولها خلسة على عضوية مكتبة من أجل أن تقرأ روايات رومانسية باللغة الإنجليزية و تتحدى كل المعوقات و تسبح في ثوب سباحة، كما أنها ترتدى شرايات نسائية شفافة في مخالفة لقوانين جماعتها الدينية الصارمة. و ينتهى الحال بريتشل زوجة مستعصية العناد و تنتهى الرواية بهروبها و طلاقها. و ختاماً عندما تعود لمنزل عائلتها، تُعامل ريتشل على أنها شخصية غير مرغوب فيها. و من خلال تطبيق القراءة النقدية النفسية لرواية قارئة الروايات الرومانسية نخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أن القهر في البيت الحسيدى أمرٌ يفرضه الأب على نفسه ذاتياً ثم يسقطه نفسياً على زوجته التي بدورها تسقطه على أبنيتها. و تحتل علاقة من يمارس الإسقاط النفسى و من يُمارس عليه بين الأم الحسيدية و أبنيتها العنيدة بؤرة إهتمام هذه القراءة النقدية النفسية.

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