

Jewish American Women in an Orthodox World
The Literary Representation of a Struggle for Selfhood

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Emma Brouwer, 3468313
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First reader: Derek Rubin
Second reader: William Philip
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1. Introduction

[A]round the 1980s, something happened. Young Jewish cultural escape artists—both the beneficiaries and victims of assimilation played to perfection—stopped writing about distinctively Jewish themes.

Until now. TIKKUN is proud to be among the first to observe a new, surprisingly uncelebrated movement—the resurgence of Jewish writing in America. (Rosenbaum 33)

In 1997, Tikkun’s literary editor Thane Rosenbaum devoted a literary symposium to “The Jewish Literary Revival,” with which he refuted Irving Howe’s introduction to *Jewish American Stories* (1977), in which Howe proclaimed the end of Jewish American literature. Together with other literary critics such as Nessa Rapoport and Ted Solotaroff, Rosenbaum brought to the public’s attention the existence of what Derek Parker Royal referred to as “a growing critical awareness of ... a Jewish American literary revival” (2). Not only did they bring into focus a list of numerous young Jewish American writers, but they also noticed a “renewed interest in Jewish religion and culture” (Parker Royal 2). Whereas the established heroes of Jewish American fiction like Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud often put their Jewish heritage only in the background of their work, sometimes even dismissing it entirely, the new generation of writers often lets it play the leading part.

This so-called “New Wave” of American Jewish writers, confirms Marcus Lee Hansen’s theory about third-generation immigrants. In the 1930s, he described the pattern of behavior of third-generation immigrants who show a revived interest in their ancestor’s past. His theory often has been summarized by his statement: “the grandson wishes to remember what the son preferred to forget” (Appel 3), and this applies well to the ‘new wave’-authors when considering they are

the third generation of Jewish American writers, succeeding the first-generation immigrant-literature from writers such as Anzia Yeziarska, and the second-generation post-immigrant-literature of the previously mentioned heroes of Jewish American fiction.

Despite this awakened interest in Jewish religion and culture, it is far from a harmonious or devout image that emerges from most of the novels from the 1990s onwards. As Janet Burstein points out, “an often *ambivalent* [emphasis added] gesture of recovery emerges vividly from these writings and distinguishes ... [the writers of the new wave] as a group” (803). Characters struggle with the place they must, or want to take in religion, the form of it, and the balance between religious and secular life. Especially female authors often create characters living in a polarized world who are constantly on a quest to try to fill the sense of emptiness they seem to share. Their female protagonists characteristically do not only struggle with the tension between religious and secular values, but also with their roles as women in the Jewish tradition. Susan Jacobowitz remarks that “[o]ften the daughters of the Orthodox are depicted as confused and deliberating, and almost all of them are in at least some degree of emotional confusion and pain. These modern authors try to analyze and enter into a deeper understanding of the roots of that pain” (74).

By returning to Orthodoxy, Jewish women also return to a patriarchy. Considering the development of the relations between men and women in the Western world of the 20th century, it is a step back to live in a male-centered community, and many female Jewish American writers are aware of that and show it in their writing. For example, novelist Rebecca Goldstein tells the readers of *Tikkun* that she often has to go “backward in time” (43) during her writing process. She tries to imagine the role of talented women in Jewish communities from the old world and

this results in novels that hold the most complex Jewish female characters, like Fraydel in *Mazel* and Renee in *The Mind-Body Problem*.

This paper will focus on female protagonists living in a Jewish Orthodox community. The two novels that will be discussed are *The Romance Reader* (1995) by Pearl Abraham and *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998) by Allegra Goodman. Their female characters are respectively Rachel Benjamin, a young girl in her teens and Elizabeth Shulman, a middle-aged woman with 5 children. Despite their divergent ages and life-experience, both characters grapple with their Orthodox life-style. These two Jewish American women, who live in Orthodox communities in the contemporary fin de siècle, are in some sense still second-class citizens. They have difficulty accepting the traditional female role in Judaism of not being expected to study or to learn. Their foremothers may not have known better, but these women see the modern, secular world and the place of women in it changing.

In essence, Rachel and Elizabeth struggle with the same issue, namely trying to find a balance between their sacred and secular goals and values. Moreover, they are both sparked by people holding multiple “outsider positions” such as secular Jews and non-Jews, both in negative and positive ways, to try and make something more of their lives than the mere fulfillment of their expected roles. However, the degree to which they rebel and the manner in which their rebellion is portrayed is very different. While Abraham focusses on the negative distinctions between the characters and groups in her novel and the influence this has on her protagonist, Goodman takes a different angle and emphasizes solving her protagonist’s inner struggle with herself and her religion. Elizabeth fights a more internal struggle whereas Rachel is fighting against the world.

In *Who we are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*, both authors comment on their relation to fiction and it follows that their literary pursuits can be closely related to the main differences between their protagonists. In her article, Abraham focusses on “the great possibility of who and what one can be, in other words, of the tremendous potential of the individual” (231). She quotes Emerson as the ultimate American spiritualist and tries to relate his philosophy to certain Hassidic convictions. Goodman on the other hand, wants to write “a fiction that is unapologetic and energetically ethnic” (272), trying to portray Judaism in all its forms but without defining it as a particular exotic group. Goodman wants to create a mature woman who has the possibility to develop a sense of selfhood within the borders of Judaism. In contrast, Abraham fully enters into the battle against inequality, giving her protagonist a fierce character determined to find individual strength.

This paper will argue that Goodman and Abraham both use a different approach to address the female position within traditional Judaism in their literature, but that they both use the concept of the “Other” to spark their protagonists’ imagination and the subsequent feelings of unease and unrest. The paper is organized in the following way: the two novels will be discussed in two separate sections, both divided into sub-sections arranged by the specific themes of each novel. After that, a final section will bring the analyses of the two novels together and draw a conclusion.

Before we can start the analysis of the novels, a brief note on the women’s movement within the American Jewish Orthodox world has to be provided. From the early 20th century onwards, Jewish American women have been trying to improve their position within Judaism. Ranging from women study-groups, to female rabbis, Bat Mitzvahs, and celebrations of Miriam

during Passover, new traditions are being formed by women activists.¹ However, when reading this paper, one must bear in mind that the Jewish communities that are focused on are Orthodox rather than Reform or Conservative, and, thus, more traditional. Moreover, although both novels that will be discussed were published in the second half of the 1990s, the stories are both set in the 1970s. At the time, Jewish women in America were starting to be more and more serious about their roles in Judaism, but only in the more modern branches did they really try to bring about change. The historian Gerald Sorin says that “[e]ven Orthodox women mounted challenges from within” (205), but these women were members of *modern* Orthodox synagogues and they were sent to the seclusion of their homes by their rabbi’s. Most traditional Orthodox women were still taking on the classical role of obedient wives and mothers.

¹ For more information about the upward mobility of women in Judaism in America, see *Tradition Transformed: The Jewish Experience in America* by Gerald Sorin, pg. 171-173, 205-206; “Orthodox Feminism for the 21st Century” by Blu Greenberg; and “Orthodox Feminism: A Movement Whose Time Has Come” by Naomi Grossman.

2. The Romance Reader

In his reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud's work, Jacques Lacan describes the "mirror stage," in which an infant sees herself in the mirror and realizes that she is a whole and that she is not joined to other people, that she is an independent self. This realization makes her pass into the Imaginary Order where she experiences the illusion of control over the world. At a certain point, the child starts to learn a language, and this is the moment when the Imaginary Order disappears and the Symbolic Order takes over. The Symbolic Order is where the separation between I and other people is specified even more: I am me, not you; I am a girl, not a boy; I am white, not black. The unconscious and conscious minds are split and this experience causes a feeling of separateness and, consequently, a feeling of loss. The rest of our lives, "all subjectivity is based on loss, absence and failure" (Knittel, slide 16), because the labels we receive, I + girl + white, are judged and valued. Language, culture and society fill in those tags with assumptions, expectations and conditions.

Rachel Benjamin, the protagonist of Pearl Abraham's *The Romance Reader*, seems to be strongly aware of the Symbolic Order and the separations and values attached to them. It is as if she has just perceived herself again in the mirror and is starting to realize that she is not part of anything but, instead, is completely on her own. At the start of the novel, she is twelve years old and the oldest child in the family. She is reaching puberty and together with her friend Elke she is starting to discover new aspects of life as an adolescent. She is becoming more aware of her sexuality, the role of her parents in her life and her future, but also of literature and the presence of other worlds. Because Rachel is a Hassidic girl with a rabbi for a father, she lives in a very restricted and controlled community. It is a small place on the edge of town and it is inevitable for the Jews to be in close contact with the non-Jewish inhabitants. Because of the many

encounters Rachel has with the secular world, she is often torn between the excitement and novelty of it and the strict values of her Jewish community. It means that especially the awareness of the existence of other worlds plays a large part in her development, probably much more so than in the lives of other twelve-year olds.

In the course of the novel, Rachel encounters many situations in which she either feels like, or is being portrayed as, an outsider to a certain group. There is a permanent self-consciousness interfering with Rachel's actions and thoughts which is more complex and stronger than most girls in their puberty experience. Because she is often perceived as the "other" by non-Jews, she extends this feeling of being alone to the rest of her relationships. Not only does she start to feel different from non-Jews, but also from her peers, both religious and secular, her family, the Orthodox community and the Jewish community in general. Consequently, she starts to long for a change in life, for more freedom and the possibility to develop her individuality. As a reciprocal process, this American Jewish Orthodox girl is starting to define herself as a woman by contrasting herself to the people and communities that, consciously or not, exclude her. The different groups and communities in which Rachel distinguishes herself will be explored in the following three sections and after that a conclusion about *The Romance Reader* will be drawn. I will argue that because Abrahams focusses on the differences between the characters and social groups in the novel rather than on the possible connections they may establish, her protagonist is forced into a downward spiral of distrust and uncertainty and the reader is left with an open ending.

2.1 Family Matters

As the oldest of her brothers and sisters, Rachel fulfills a special role in her family. On the one hand, being a firstborn has the advantage of receiving the undivided attention of one's parents

until a sibling is born. On the other hand, research has shown “that parents expect higher achievement, are more controlling, and make added demands on their firstborn young children” (Firstborn Children). Rachel is expected to set the example for her siblings, even more so because she is the daughter of a rabbi, and this puts great pressure on her. Together with her sister Leah, she takes small steps in trying to break free from the limitations that are put on her by her parents. For example, they try to obtain a library card whereas they are not supposed to read secular literature; they go behind their parent’s backs to take their certificate in lifeguarding; and they buy themselves ‘modern stockings’ while they are expected to wear seamed ones.

While Leah may seem Rachel’s partner in crime with the same determination to fight for some freedom, gradually their collaboration starts to crumble. This happens when the girls have set up a plan to get their library card and Leah fails to distract their father. While Rachel gets caught, Leah tries to get away with it and tells her friend Zeldy that “she had nothing to do with the library, that it was [Rachel’s] idea, that [Rachel is] the bad one, the shiksa” (36). Throughout the novel it becomes clear that Leah and Rachel do not agree on the intensity of their actions and goals. As Elaine Kandall points out, “[o]nly Rachel is rebellious; the [other children], including her spirited younger sister Leah, are far more accepting of the myriad restrictions governing their lives.” Rachel is more radical, more persistent in pushing the limits and less willing to settle down.

Highly aware of the special position she holds as the oldest child, Rachel thinks at a certain moment: “Older sisters are a reward from heaven. With an older sister, I wouldn’t be the one doing all the fighting. God must love those he gives older sisters” (183). She acknowledges the pioneering position she has in the family, having the best possibility to change things for herself and her siblings. However, by emphasizing the differences between herself and her

siblings rather than trying to unite the children, she finds herself in a constant struggle with them, herself and her parents.

Meanwhile, her parents continually fight with each other. Rachel's mother is a fickle woman who constantly needs something to argue over and someone to do it with. Lore Dickstein even goes as far as describing her as "a bitter fishwife." Most of the time she is picking on her husband, belittling his ambitions to build a synagogue and complaining about his gentle character which she interprets as weak. In contrast, Rachel's father is a very quiet man whose main ambition in life is to sell his book on kabbalah and to build his own synagogue with a closely-knit community around it. Despite the successes he books in his career, in his role as a husband he seems to be very insecure. Because her parents oppose each other constantly, Rachel has difficulty defining her loyalty to either one of them. While she wants to protect her father the dreamer from the furious attacks of her mother, she also loathes him for his indecisiveness and longs for the rare moments of tenderness from her mother. A good example of the family's balance is when they are on vacation and need a place to spend the night:

We drive around, looking for Jefferson. Ma's angry now. She calls Father a shlepper. In a low voice, not to wake the children, she says, "You call this a vacation?"

At number 21, Ma says, "Rachel, go knock at the door."

"Let Father go," I say. "It's his fault."

She turns to him. "Even your daughter has no respect for you."

Without answering, Father pushes the button that says Neutral, sets the brake, and gets out of the car. . . . I'm sorry I said anything, sorry I gave Ma a chance to use my words to hurt him.

“That’s how you talk to a father?” she says. “Is that what they teach you in school?”

They’re always blaming my school for everything. As if I couldn’t learn this on my own, or from her. “You called him a shlepper,” I say.

“I’m his wife, you’re his daughter. Remember that.” ...

“Go see for yourself,” he says, afraid to decide for us, afraid of what we might say after. (Abraham 79)

In this passage, especially Ma and Rachel switch from supporting each other to attacking each other, from defending Father to turning away from him. Without a stable parent for a role model, all Rachel feels she can do is push both of them away.

Rachel’s parents are too absorbed with themselves, with each other and with obeying religious dogmas as strict as possible, and her siblings do not feel as passionately about finding more freedom outside the realm of their Jewish life. Abraham creates a lack of connection between Rachel and her family, which causes her to drift further and further away from them. She does not want to become her father because “[w]hat [her] father wants is not the same as what [she wants]” (261). Neither does she want to be like her mother: “[w]hat she didn’t do I must do. I must get away, far away, where Father and Ma ... can’t reach me” (264). She is not defining her future by what she will be, but by what she will not be, creating an image of herself which is based on the actions of others. It shows that Abraham indeed highlights the differences between her protagonist and the rest of the world, rather than trying to reconcile them.

2.2 A Jewish community

During their suburban afternoons of knitting and chatting, Ma and her neighbors discuss everybody in the neighborhood and their verdicts are unrelenting. With the blink of an eye,

someone might have become a persona non grata or, inversely, have come into favor with the group. Like Abraham's description of her own youth, Rachel also lives in "a world in which even the style of the boots [she] wore was a topic of contention" (Divinity 236), and this constant scrutiny puts great limitations on public behavior. Consequently, the arguments the Benjamin children give for doing or not doing something often include the fear of being seen by someone. When Rachel suggests to Leah to go the library on a Friday afternoon, Leah's response is filled with restraint: "'You're crazy,' [Leah] says. 'Half of Monhegan is there on a Friday. Everyone goes to the library before Shabbat.'" She's right. Someone will see us, the rabbi's daughters, at the library, and it will get back to Ma. In this town, everything gets back to Ma" (25). Whereas the pressure of living up to the standards of the Orthodox community are a shared burden for the neighborhood children, the Benjamin daughters have even higher expectations to live up to, being the rabbi's daughters. Rachel has to be a role model both inside her home and outside, and this leaves very little space for experimenting and self-expression.

However, rather than letting Rachel take on this preformed straitjacket, Abraham makes her provoke her Orthodox critics. She does not try to solve or reconcile the tension between Rachel and her control-group but enlarges it, letting them drift apart even further. During one of the afternoon-sessions, Rachel is asked by one of the women what she wears in the swimming pool: "'[p]eople are saying you swim in a bathing suit. I said I don't believe it. Not Rabbi Benjamin's daughters'" (175). Rachel is so infuriated by this judgment and by the shame that is brought upon her and her mother publicly, that she rudely reacts asking what it is that "Mrs. Holy of Holies" wears in the swimming pool. The answer she gets, "'I always wore a bathing suit. That's what my mother wore. But I don't claim to be special. I'm not a rabbi's wife or daughter'" (76), may be the articulation of Rachel's greatest frustration: it is not her personality

or her actions that make her “special” for others, but the fact that she is a Hassidic rabbi’s daughter. She is being chastised for something she did not choose to be and she is defined by others as a product of her parents rather than an individual.

Not only the older women scrutinize Rachel’s behavior, but her friends and classmates do so as well. Even Rachel’s best friend Elke condemns her behavior, and especially her behavior as the daughter of the rabbi:

“You think too modern,” [Elke] says. “You always did. You always did things that were too modern for your family. Too modern even for the most modern girls in our class. And you’re from a rebbishe family. Everyone in school talked about it. Even Leah thinks so. She says you just never know when to stop, that you have no limits”. (221)

Being judged by people around her, Rachel feels as an outsider who is different from everyone else. Considering Kendall’s remark that “[d]aily life for the ultra-orthodox is designed to take place in a virtual time-warp; a snug environment that manages to exclude most of the distractions and discontentments surrounding it,” it can be argued that Rachel is actually strongheaded enough to shatter this “time-warp.” The distractions from the outside world appeal to her too much to ignore but unfortunately she stands alone in this. Only when the family visits Williamsburg, the largest Hassidic community in the world, does she feel that she belongs. One of the reasons is that there is lesser control in this community because it is so large that not everybody knows each other. Furthermore, if they would live in Williamsburg, Rachel’s father would not stand out so much but be “like everyone else, a Chassid who lives near his rebbe, who prays with his rebbe every day” (96), which would take a lot of pressure off Rachel’s shoulders. And lastly, but most important, there would be no outside world passing its silent judgment onto

the Orthodox Jews. No “other” would directly distract and bother Rachel and she would only have to deal with her family. Like in a sort of Truman-show-bubble, Rachel’s unconscious desires for change and rebellion would not be stimulated as much and she would be able to suppress it and fit in. Yet again, Abraham does not give Rachel an easy way out, but makes her go back to the staring eyes in their town Ashley. Slowly but surely, she lets her protagonist discover the unfulfilling parts of her life that make her want to break out.

2.3 The Outside World

During the summer, all the bungalows in Ahsley are rented by Orthodox Jews, making it a lively place. During the rest of the year however, the Benjamins are the only Orthodox family in town and they are surrounded by people in outsider positions. The presence and the gaze of these outsiders enhance Rachel’s feeling of discomfort because she senses their silent judgments every day. Her relation to them is actually crucial for the argument of this paper, because their behavior of “othering” the Orthodox Jews serves as an example for Rachel’s own behavior of othering. Because they alienate Rachel, she starts alienating her family and community.

Paradoxically, Rachel feels that people unfamiliar with her religious customs look down on her yet at the same time she longs to be more like them, or at least to have the freedom she assumes they have. Rachel’s ultimate other is the non-Jew and everyone around her--both Hassidic and secular Jews--emphasizes this diachronic relationship. For example, Rachel’s father argues that “[a] Jew ... is never liked by other nations. A Jew reads only Jewish books and must remain separate” (34), and this line of reasoning makes Rachel perceive the outside world in a very negative light. When she and Leah are at a grocery store, Rachel only focuses on the fact that “[the] store is filled with things [they] can’t eat” (Abraham 26) and the sisters spend their time yearning for the non-kosher food. Moreover, when Rachel is in the library, all she thinks

about is how her teacher would have the freedom to “[take] out as many books as she can carry” (33), not having to worry about being seen by anyone. In short, Rachel values her own life by the things other people have and she lacks.

Confirming her father’s theory, a saleslady at the bookstore silently denounces the sisters with her gaze:

The orange-haired lady at the counter looks at us, and her eyes go up and down, from our faces to our shoes. ... She’s seen us before ... still she looks us up and down every time, as if to let us know how strange we look wearing dark tights and long sleeves on a hot day in July. ... When she hands me the change, she pours it into my palm, careful not to touch me, as is whatever it is I am is catching. (25-6)

In Feminist theory, the viewpoint of the white male is often critiqued because it is said to degrade women,² and in the case of *The Romance Reader*, the gaze of the non-Jews actually degrades the Orthodox Jews. Another disparaging gaze comes from a bus driver who keeps his eyes on Rachel’s back when she is getting off. She thinks: “I can feel his hate, his impatience; his hand is on the lever, the hand that wants to close the door before I am completely through it. If I looked like the blond girl who works at McDonald’s, he’d take his hand off the knob and wave” (33). It is almost as if Rachel wants his look to be more voyeuristic in the sense that he would look at her with a sexual connotation rather than with a gaze of contempt. However, she realizes: “I am a Jew and will remain hated,” (34) and this is Abraham’s formulation of the disparaging motto to Rachel’s line of thought throughout the novel. She emphasizes the differences between groups and people and makes these tensions even more complex by inserting the paradoxical desire for belonging to those who belittle you.

² See for example Laura Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1999).

2.4 Conclusion

In the previous sections, it has been established that Abraham creates a tension between Rachel and her surroundings, highlighting the differences rather than the similarities between several characters and social groups. She uses the concept of the “other” to spark Rachel’s tendency to discover more of the world than just the confinement of the Orthodox community. In the end of the novel, Rachel has tried so hard not to take on the expected role of subservient housewife that she has drifted away from her friends and family entirely. Anne Roiphe remarks that “[the reader] understand[s] that [Rachel’s] freedom will be bought at a high price because there is no middle ground. You are either a part of a world which makes a huge moral and social issue out of a girl's wearing stockings with seams or you are a stranger, a person who stands entirely outside God's circle.” Rachel has indeed alienated herself from the regulated world Roiphe describes, but it is important to point out that she has not chosen to “stand outside God’s circle.” She has not turned away from her faith and has internalized the values of Judaism. It is rather the people around her who might conclude from her behavior against the secular values of her religious community that she has also left God behind, but it is only those secular values Rachel condemns.

Rachel has concluded that everything in the lives of the people around her revolves around the scrutiny of others and that this conflicts with their claim to be truly devout. She disagrees with their interpretation of religion but not with religion itself. She does not turn away from God but from the people when she accuses her father: ““[y]ou’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”” (179). Because of people, because of others, Rachel does not have the peace and quiet to find her own way in living

a religious life and in becoming a happy, Jewish woman. Abraham has chosen to end the novel with a rupture rather than reconciliation, continuing her method of emphasizing differences. She leaves the reader with a heroine uncertain of her future relation with Orthodox Judaism, with her family and with herself. This open ending is, however, not entirely one of despair and uncertainty. As Abraham points out in an interview, “[Rachel moves] toward more experience, toward an expansion of the self, toward self-knowing, toward Gnosis, which is to say toward the most sacred journey an individual can make” (Bolton-Fasman). By focusing on the differences between the characters and social groups in the novel, Abraham’s heroine is forced into a downward spiral of distrust and uncertainty, but after going down, one can only go up.

3. *Kaaterskill Falls*

When recalling Lacan's notions of the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order, the latter is of great importance for *Kaaterskill Falls*, whereas a person's transition from the former into the latter was significant in the analysis of *The Romance Reader*. The Symbolic Order is not only the place where we experience a feeling of separateness and loss but it is also the collection of rules, expectations and paradigms that we call culture and that govern and control our lives. It includes our automatized relations towards each other, our perception of gender- and class roles and our general ethical values. Summing up the many conditions it contains, the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism* describe it as "a Symbolic Order of separation between self and (m)other, of law and patriarchal social codes, and of loss and associated desire" (Leitch, "Introduction"). Despite the negative connotations it may incur, the Symbolic Order is where we spend most of our time and *everyone* has to live in it and with it.

The protagonist of *Kaaterskill Falls*, Elizabeth Shulman, has long ago made the transfer from the Imaginary into the Symbolic. She is 34 with 5 children and part of the Jewish Orthodox Kirshner community in Washington Heights, New York, which in the summer temporarily migrates to the small town Kaaterskill. Elizabeth seems to live the steady, regular, traditional life of an Orthodox woman, being a housewife and taking care of her husband and children. She goes to shul every week, says her prayers, eats and cooks kosher food, and admires the community's rabbi, Rav Elijah Kirshner. At a certain point, however, Elizabeth becomes restless and she starts longing for something more in life. She will have her first summer without being pregnant, the children will be at summer camp, her husband works in the city during the week and she wants to undertake something. She decides to open up a kosher store in Kaaterskill in order to start what Omer-Sherman calls "a project that will enable her to serve both her cloistered community

and her sense of selfhood” (269). However, because of the “rabbinic ordinances, religious rituals and the insulating values of [her] community” that Daphne Merkin points out, Elizabeth struggles with finding the peace and freedom she longs for.

Rather than feeling an outsider, like Rachel Benjamin, Elizabeth sometimes feels *too much* of an insider. She longs for the intellectual freedom and expertise that the non-Jewish people and more modern Jews around her have, and looks up to those whom she considers to have found a balance between aiming for their ambitions and devoting their life to God. Merkin articulates “the crux of the novel” in her review of *Kaaterskill Falls* as being “the split in [Elizabeth’s] allegiance -- between the unyielding demands of tribalism and the wide perimeters of fantasy.” Goodman plays out an intricate turn of the tables by constantly switching between characters, showing how they all admire and desire what others have or do. This use of dramatic irony makes the reader see that what we think we admire in others may not even be a true characteristic of this person; nothing is what it seems. This reasoning is in line with Lacan’s definition of desire, namely that “what is left of absolute demand when all possible satisfaction of needs has been subtracted from it. In other words, desire is what by definition remains unsatisfiable” (Leitch, “Jacques Lacan”). Elizabeth feels a desire for something unknown deep inside her and this feeling is prompted because she sees it in others around her. She takes action and sets up a store, enjoys it for a summer, but in the end discovers that it is not the solution for her. In other words, the satisfaction of her desire is unattainable.

Elizabeth is an American Jewish Orthodox woman who has always fulfilled the very modest, traditional role expected of her, but who becomes increasingly aware of the subordination of this role through the agency of some of the more liberated people around her. Goodman depicts different characters and social situations in order to expose the many factors

that play a role in Elizabeth's life and that complicate or help her quest in defining her individual qualities and abilities. In keeping with the attempt to consolidate all these different aspects in the end rather than to let their distinctiveness drive them apart, Goodman creates a character who develops into a rounded and self-aware woman.

3.1 Secular Lives

At first sight, Kaaterskill seems a warm-hearted and close-knit community where everyone lives peacefully together. It is depicted as a sunny and green place where neighbors go along fine and where religious and secular people find their way with each other. In *The Romance Reader*, Rachel mainly perceives the outside world negatively because the gaze of the non-Jews dominates her, making her feel like a minority. In *Kaaterskill Falls*, however, the roles are almost reversed. The town has become "a summer home for the ultrareligious Jews" (62) and its secular inhabitants, the "year-rounders," are slowly being pushed aside. They cannot depend on the Jews for their income since, "with their modest incomes, big families, parochial tastes, these Orthodox don't nurture boutiques and restaurants, parks, or college scholarships for the town children" (62). Their businesses are slowly going down and when Elizabeth opens her kosher store in the backroom of a souvenir shop, the non-Jewish owner Hamilton has to face the fact that this Jewish woman has many more customers than he does. The Jews have the upper hand in Kaaterskill.

However, small pin-pricks from the secular world keep some of the Jewish congregants constantly aware of the looming but unattainable possibilities outside their "small and perfect world" (247). For example, Renée, the 15-year old daughter of the devout Jewish convert Nina and the lapsed Jewish Andras, meets the politically engaged and secular Stephanie who lures her

into a summer filled with refreshing activities and conversations. It is Stephanie who articulates the most prominent abuses of traditional Judaism as seen from a strictly secular point.

“You don’t have ambition,” says Stephanie.

“I don’t know what I want to be ambitious *about*,” Renée protests.

“Well,” says Stephanie, “you’d better be careful or you’ll end up like all those other women in Rabbitville.”

“What do you mean?”

“Housewives, of course. You’ve got to open your eyes, Renée.” ...

“You’re going to spend your whole life doing what people tell you to,” Stephanie says. “It’s like you’re cursed. You’re like a goose or something. Whoever you’re with is going to imprint you. Whoever you see first, you’ll follow wherever he goes. Your father, your boyfriend, your husband—” (179)

Renée, like Rachel Benjamin, shows a much more drastic form of rebellion than Elizabeth and is more direct in her questioning of Jewish tradition. Stephanie’s kinds of commentaries do not come as heavily to Elizabeth however, and surely do not cause as much distress as they do with Renée. Because she knows the other side of life as a housewife, the bliss of being loved by husband and children and taking care of them, Elizabeth does not consider turning away from it. For younger girls like Rachel and Renée and Elizabeth’s daughters, a completely different life is still a possibility and an option to consider, but for Elizabeth such a radical reaction is not feasible or admirable anymore. Ruth R. Wisse praises Goodman exactly for this fact, for her ability to avoid the tradition to merely create “Jewish martyrs and heroes rather than ordinary human beings engaged in ordinary human tasks” (68). Because Goodman contrasts Elizabeth

with the impressionable and wild-running Renée, Elizabeth's own struggle becomes more dignified but also more poignant in its limitedness.

Another secular character in the novel is Ernestine Schermerhorn, the librarian of the Kendall Falls Library. She is a somewhat older woman who follows a strict regime at her library; “[s]he is a proud librarian, watchful and keen,” and she scrutinizes the selection of books that children want to rent “as if to judge whether [they are] worthy” (51). Elizabeth's daughters are a little scared of her and often leave the library “thoroughly subdued by Mrs. Schermerhorn” (53). Strikingly, the library in *The Romance Reader* is also a place imbued with fear and the feeling of being watched. By putting up a barrier between young girls and literature, both Goodman and Abraham emphasize the traditionally Jewish restriction on literature being only accessible for men, an abuse which Burstein still considered to be a source of concern in 2001: “[a]s many historians have noted, and as I have observed elsewhere, Jewish tradition excluded women from authority in communal and religious life and denied them the education enjoyed by their brothers, fathers, and husbands” (805). It shows the curtailment of women's fantasy and their access to learning and development of the mind.

In *The Romance Reader*, the library remains a factor to be conquered. Rachel struggles with obtaining a library card and even after she has finally gotten one she still thinks of the library as domesticated rather than befriended. In *Kaaterskill Falls*, however, Mrs. Schermerhorn merely puts up a show “with a kind of humor the girls miss” (52), and is actually a very friendly and intelligent woman. She is the only character in the novel who calls the 5 girls by the “English” names that Elizabeth has given them at birth rather than the Jewish versions of them. Elizabeth had “wanted something remarkable and elegant—beyond the usual expectations” for her daughters, so she had “named them to have imagination” (10). Because the librarian is the

only character using these names, she actually stands very close to Elizabeth's hopes and dreams and takes them more seriously than most other characters in the novel do. Goodman partly dissolves the tensed relation between Jewish girls and literature with the help of a secular librarian. In other words, with the help of a secular "other," Goodman addresses a tradition of Orthodox Judaism that she deems outmoded.

3.2 A Confined Community

Although the Kirshner Jews do not wear their hair in peyes or grow a long beard like the Hassidic Jews, they are nevertheless very traditional in their lifestyle. Their neighborhood in Washington Heights is depicted as rather narrow and crammed, being only a small part of a large city. They are enclosed by other neighborhoods and they seem to feel the need to shut themselves off from these others in order to maintain their own values and religion; the need to protect themselves from the outside. "No Kirshners climb up to Fort Tyron Park or go to the museum there, the Cloisters, with its icons and crucifixes, its medieval sculpture carved in cool gray stone. The Kirshners never think of the Cloisters. They are absorbed in their own religion" (4). When they go to Kaaterskill, however, "[e]verything is easier" (6). They are now on their own domain and feel much more comfortable and at ease living in a more hermetic place. In Kaaterskill there is no need for protection from the outside world. Consequently, Elizabeth has to find more space and freedom for herself within the bounds of her religious community.

People who stray from the Orthodox path, like the rabbi's son Jeremy, are not spoken about and are being shut out. In this case, it is not the outside world who "others" Jews, but it is the Jews themselves who create insiders and outsiders. For example, Nina expresses her unbelief about people who send their children to public schools. "She doesn't mind them studying among goyim, But I, for one, would never take the risk. If you're with others you forget who you are.

Assimilation” (39). Goodman creates a Jewish population that turns away from the outside world voluntarily, choosing to focus on their own world. It is a demonstration of what she conveys in her article in *Who we Are*: “I write from the inside, taking...an idiom in which ritual and liturgy are a natural part of my fictional world” (271). She wants to write from the viewpoint of a Jewish community and not from the eyes of an outsider looking into a strange world.

Paradoxically, Goodman creates a secluded Jewish space wherein she gives her protagonist the possibility to wander and experiment within Judaism, but at the same time it is the borders of this space that give Elizabeth her unrest and her longing for change. Over the years, the rabbi “has guided his community into a life of increasing restrictions” (31) with his pragmatic and strict belief, and the confinements he lays on his community have made it into a traditionally hegemonic world. Wisse points out the rare religious model that Goodman has chosen for the Kirshner Jews: “[t]he “Kirshners” accept the dynastic leadership of their rabbi in the manner of Hassidic Jews, but follow traditions that are sinewy-rational, not ecstatic.” They are “encouraged to...receive a secular education—the better to withstand the challenges of modernity—while at the same time separating themselves from Jews who deviated from religious law” (68). So, despite the apparent small amount of freedom within the secular, the rabbi still controls all aspects of his follower’s lives as an overpowering entity.

Even the very pious Isaac, Elizabeth’s husband, feels as if he has to keep his guard up constantly. Next to the rabbi and his son, he is probably the most devout and God-fearing character, yet even he feels uncomfortable at times. “Isaac can’t help considering what the others think, the men in the minyan and in shiur. His neighbors and friends. In his most secret thoughts, self-critical and self-indulgent, he is painfully aware of the hierarchy within the community. The levels defined by scholarship and rabbinic ancestry” (141). By not only depicting the struggle of

her female characters but also those of the men, Goodman actually addresses the whole system of traditional Judaism. As she mentions in an interview with Bookbrowse, “[she] wanted to write about men and women who were believers and traditionalists and even separatists in America, but to write about them as individuals, and as human, with all their idiosyncrasies, their ambitions, their fears, their flaws and their hopes” (“An interview with”). She contrasts the hierarchical, patriarchal, confining and outmoded side of Judaism with the hopeful, loving, comforting and rich traditional side, and by depicting both sides rather than focusing on one of the two, she creates a well-balanced space for her characters to mature.

3.3 Desire for the Other

In the Orthodox community, Elizabeth is “unusual” (10) for being an Englishwoman and for reading world-literature but she is accepted and respected because she is a devout mother and housewife. With a rather free-spirited upbringing and a background in education, she has been comforting herself with literature during her years of pregnancy and raising children. It seems as if she has secretly convinced herself that she belongs to the group of educated, religious scholars in Kaaterskill, like Cecil Birnbaum, in order to satisfy her natural longing for finding selfhood in literature and scholarship. However, with the arrival of the educated Jeremy Kirshner and Cecil’s wife Beatrix, a witty mathematician from Oxford, Elizabeth starts to be more and more aware of her position *outside* this group. Especially her encounter with Jeremy, whom she has known about but has never met, makes her realize that she may be the only person considering herself to be on the same level with them. While “[t]here is a feeling with Cecil, and even more with Beatrix, of a kind of brisk and academic egalitarianism, as if in their house anyone can say anything” (24), Jeremy responds to Elizabeth as if she is merely one of the many Kirshner housewives. Moreover, while Merkin argues that Beatrix and Elizabeth “form a cautious

friendship,” their relation is not one of equality but of secret envy, since Elizabeth longs for a taste of Beatrix’s life while Beatrix looks at Elizabeth with a mixture of empathy and wonder.

Next to the undefinable and constantly changing relationship between Elizabeth and Beatrix, the interaction between Nina and Elizabeth is often troubled by subjective interpretations. On her part, Nina admires Elizabeth for her discipline and her “religious observance, natural to her as breathing” (77). She is afraid that, unlike Elizabeth for whom religion comes as a second nature, she will always remain an outsider to the Jewish community because she came late to religion. On top of that, she would love for her rebellious daughter to befriend Elizabeth’s children because they are “so sweet to Nina’s thinking, so pious, utterly sheltered from the outside world. So safe, they don’t even know it” (82). So, while Elizabeth feels as if something missing in her life, being “ravenously hungry” for “something to do” (79), Nina thinks of Elizabeth and her family as the ultimate pious Jews, being under the impression that her life is a form of perfection to strive for. And while Elizabeth “imagines someday her daughters could be scholars themselves” (69), Nina sees them as completely protected and shut off from the outside world.

This situation is a great example of G. W. F. Hegel’s discussion of the “other” in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He states that “[e]ach is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and therefore its own self-certainty has no truth” (113). Both Nina and Elizabeth have a certain image of themselves which is their “self-certainty,” but their self-image does not correspond to the image that the other has of them. They try to conform to the image that they have of the other, but because that image will never be completely “true,” their self-image remains unstable and uncertain. Goodman shows that it is imbedded in human nature to mirror one’s self to others, but that it will never result in an improved perception of the self. Developing

a sense of selfhood and individualism should, ideally, be an internal process of inner reflection and not of outward desire.

3.4 Conclusion

In the previous sections, three aspects of *Kaaterskill Falls* have been highlighted. Firstly, two secular characters have been discussed who both try to improve the role of women in traditional Judaism in their own way, trying to raise awareness about certain abuses. Secondly, the inwardness of the Kirshner community and the limitations this puts on its members have been mentioned, and lastly, the poignant habit to desire something that others have while others desire what you have has been related to Elizabeth. In order to complete the argument that Goodman tries to end the novel with the reconciliation of the different factors that pull and push Elizabeth, the goal Elizabeth sets for herself in the beginning of the novel and the result of it have to be considered. Although she wants to do something new, to develop a sense of selfhood, Elizabeth has never wanted to stray from the religious path:

This love of the outside world is a kind of voyeurism for Elizabeth, and realizing that, she is dissatisfied. If she could do more than watch; if she could participate—do something or create something in the shimmering, spinning secular world. If she could move outside the fixed and constant realm in which she lives. But, of course, without giving it up, without exchanging it. Her religious life is not something she can cast off; it's part of her. Its rituals are not rituals to her; not objects, but instincts. She lives inside them and can't hold them up to look at. That is the beauty of the secular world—she can examine it. And yet she'd like to hold it more closely; really touch it. (57)

Elizabeth is an insider in the Orthodox community and an outsider to the secular world. She wants to stay within Judaism but also become an insider and participant in the outside world. However, through her interaction with other characters during the course of the novel, she learns that she does not want to be part of the actual outside world but rather internalize its spirit of individuality and freedom and adapt this to her life within the Jewish world.

Goodman lends her heroine the space to discover that she can also enforce her individuality within the realm of traditional Judaism, thereby offering her readers a refreshing perspective on Orthodoxy. As Omer-Sherman points out, rather than “either crassly indicting or sentimentalizing its authoritarianism,” Goodman shows both the “challenges” and the “rewards” of Orthodox Judaism (285). In “Writing with a Return Address,” Goodman incites Jewish American writers to write “literary images of Judaism ... seriously and not satirically or sentimentally or dismissively” and she gives them a great example of such writing in *Kaaterskill Falls*.

4. Conclusion

After Rosenbaum had pointed out the revival of Jewish American literature in 1997, Jacobowitz noticed in 2004 that “[i]nto the world of fiction then, slowly, come the daughters of the Orthodox.” Abraham and Goodman are both instigators of this phenomenon, having chosen to represent the insular world of Orthodox Judaism in America and to show its complexities by portraying the struggles of its female partakers. Both female characters feel a lack of satisfaction in their traditional, subservient roles as women in a patriarchal community and start to look for something outside the realm of Orthodoxy, hoping to find a way to develop as an individual. The authors use a very different approach in portraying their character’s struggle and their choice of protagonist can be related to their literary goals as expressed in their essays in *Who we are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*.

Abraham uses a method of approach in *The Romance Reader* that can be called deconstructing. She makes her teenager protagonist become aware of the distance between herself and the outside world by using the negating gaze of non-Jews around her. These people make Rachel feel like the “other,” which ignites her to start “othering” the people close to her. She starts pushing herself away from the confinements of the Orthodox community, trying to find a balance between keeping her faith and finding the space to develop a sense of individuality. However, the balance tips and she finds herself between two worlds, not being able to truly be part of the secular world, but no longer being accepted as a member of the Orthodox world either. Abraham focusses on the differences between social groups and characters and leaves the reader with a broken-down protagonist, uncertain of her future.

Goodman’s procedure on the other hand, can be seen as one of construction. In *Kaaterskill Falls*, she does not paint a specifically negative or positive picture of Orthodox

Judaism, but rather shows its complexities. She creates the space for her protagonist to experiment with her intellectual aspirations while still adhering to her religious values. Although they are very critical, the outsiders around Elizabeth do not lead her away from the Jewish community but make her aware of her possibilities of growth within Judaism. Goodman tries to consolidate all the different factors that influence Elizabeth from the outside and gives the reader a well-balanced, self-aware woman at the end of the novel.

By using outsider positions to stimulate their protagonists in their attempt to create a sense of selfhood, Goodman and Abraham both address the issue of the female position within Orthodox Judaism in America in their literature. They show that growing up in an insulated environment with a limited degree of exposure to the outside world, such as the Jewish Orthodox world, may potentially lead to friction. They create fiction about a socially marginalized group without lapsing into the use of stereotypes, portraying Jewish American individuals instead of characterizations of Jewish Americans. In her article on Charlotte Gilman Perkins, Hayley Cavaturo explores Simone de Beauvoir's take on femininity in *The Second Sex* and she writes that "[de Beauvoir] implores writers to create fully-developed, round female characters. ... If literature becomes populated with fully realized female characters, than society at large may stop perpetuating the myth of the female as the exotic "other," and the cycle of femininity as a social construct will vanish, giving women freedom." With the creation of Rachel Benjamin and Elizabeth Shulman, Abraham and Goodman have contributed significantly to the growing collection of "fully-developed, round female characters," adding the intriguing aspect of Jewish Orthodoxy.

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